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HENRY PLUMMER- MASTER KILLER

ONE-TIME SHERIFF, INDIAN FIGHTER GAMBLER AND OUTLAW.

by

TOM LEWIS

LAST-STAND STOCKADE

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By LINTON DAVIES

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Frontier Stories

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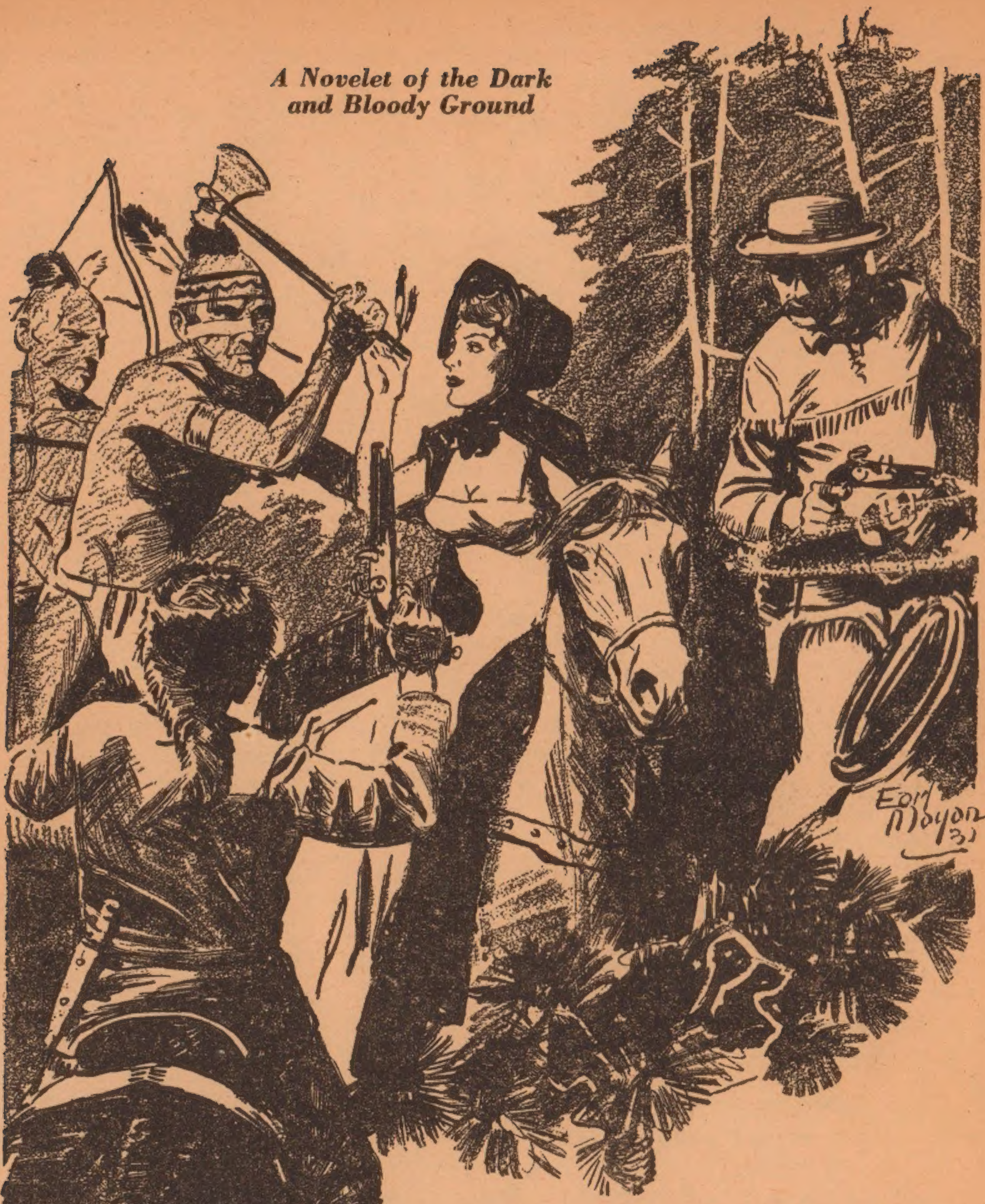

He was a single buckskin soldier against Burr's beautiful renegade—a swift sword striving to stem the treason-tide of empire!

Queen of the Borderers

By TED FOX

A FEW lights still burned in the settlement along Powell's River. As he strode down the wagon road between the double row of crude log cabins, Glenn Hardy glanced up at the stars overhead and shivered. The clear December night was growing cold, and he quickened his pace at thought of the crackling fire waiting for him at the edge of the forest ahead. Moonlight glinted on the long bar-

rel of the rifle he carried crooked under his right arm. The faint gurgle of the river sounded off to his left. Then suddenly he stopped and whirled about to face a narrow alley between two of the nearest log cabins.

Leaping forward, he darted down the alley, his moccasins making litttle noise on the soft earth, his tread like that of a powerful cat. He had heard a sharp cry then silence, then the scuffling of feet and another sharp cry, this time a woman's. Two bounds took him down the alley and into the clearing beyond. There he paused, anger flushing his lean bronzed face as he stared at the scene before him.

Two men were rolling along the ground, locked in each other's arms. First one was on top, then the other. But Glenn gave them only a single, swift glance, his attention veering to the woman who was struggling in the arms of a third man. She was fighting like a wild-cat, plucking at the pair of hands encircling her slim body from behind, one around her waist, the other clamped over her mouth to shut off the frightened cries that choked in her throat.

Dropping his gun for fear of hitting the woman, Glenn Hardy leaped forward with a savage yell. Fights among the settlers were a common, everyday occurrence. An attack on a woman was a different thing entirely. With lowered head and driving legs Glenn charged the man, who hurled the woman aside and turned to meet his attack.

Right and left Glenn's fists shot out and sank into a hairy face and bone-hard body. There were a hundred and eighty pounds of steel-like muscle behind those blows and with a low grunt, as the wind was hammered from him, the outlaw toppled to the ground. Reaching down, Glenn seized him by the hair and dragged his vast bulk upright. The man stood weaving on his feet. Glenn stepped back. His fist whistled out and crashed against the other's jaw, dropped him to the ground in a huddled heap.

Whirling, Glenn ran across the clearing to where the woman was just struggling to her feet. One of her slim hands was wiping away the blood from her bruised lips. Her other suddenly clutched his arm as he helped her to rise.

"Father!" she gasped and pointed to the pair who were fighting on the ground. "Help him, please."

Spinning about, Glenn followed the direction of her finger. There was no mistaking which was her father. The pair had stopped tumbling along the ground. One was underneath, the other astride his chest. The man on top was dressed in the buckskin garb of the frontier. The other man wore trousers and a long coat. His hat had fallen off, showing flowing white hair.

A knife gleamed in the moonlight. It rose and fell. Even as he lunged forward Glenn knew he was too late. He heard the old man's cry of pain, saw the knife come up for a second blow. There was still thirty feet between them so he did the only possible thing. Whipping out the tomahawk which he usually carried, he drew back his arm and hurled it with every ounce of his great strength.

With a dull thud the hatchet-like weapon cleaved the outlaw's skull between his ears. The knife slipped from his fingers and clattered to the ground. With a shudder he fell forward on the old man and lay quivering.

AS he reached the pair a second later and was dragging the outlaw's body to one side, Glenn saw the young woman fall to her knees beside her father. Reaching down Glenn yanked his tomahawk from the dead man's skull. A stream of blood gushed up out of the wound and flowed to the ground in a spreading pool of red. With some leaves Glenn wiped off his tomahawk and slung it in his belt. Then he knelt beside the woman and ripped open the old man's shirt.

A swift examination showed that the old fellow was alive but badly wounded where the knife blade had pierced his body high up on the right shoulder. The woman gasped at sight of the bleeding gash and though she didn't cry out, Glenn could feel her trembling as she swayed dizzily against him.

"Your father will be all right," he said reassuringly as he rose to his feet. "It's not fatal."

Lights were springing up in the cabins roundabout. Roused by the commotion, the settlers were pouring out into the night in various stages of undress. Willing hands

lifted the old man and carried him into the nearest house. Several of the men-folk were standing about the dead outlaw. With a few words Glenn told them what had happened, then he turned with clenched fists to look for the man he had knocked down. A quick glance showed him the other had fled.

Moving fast, his lean face grim and cold, Glenn Hardy went to work. Like a fox-hound on the scent he followed the outlaw's trail down the clearing, losing it in the darkness, picking it up again in a patch of moonlight, then losing it altogether in the wagon road he had been following before the fight. With a shrug Glenn returned to his rifle and picking it up walked to the cabin where they had taken the wounded stranger.

Pushing open the door, he stepped into the cabin and leaned his flint-lock against the wall. The room was half full of curious settlers who stood about the walls and before the fireplace, watching as their wives helped the young woman bathe her father's wound. She was on her knees beside the big double bed. She looked up as Glenn entered and for one brief moment their glances held. Then she turned back to her work, a faint flush creeping into her pallid cheeks as she dipped a clean bandage into a bowl of water on the table beside her. But Glenn Hardy continued to stare at her, his mouth sagging open in amazement.

Never in his life, either here on the border or back in civilization where beauty was to be found in every home, had he seen anyone so lovely before. He had thought her to be a woman, one of those raw-boned women of the frontier, but she was only a young girl with wide brown eyes and a mass of auburn-colored hair that fell to her shoulders. In sharp contrast to the homespun of the settlers her dress was of silk cut in the latest style of the Empire period, yet oddly enough, not out of place here or anywhere because of the noble carriage of her head, the delicacy of her features and the slim youthfulness of her figure. Glenn glanced at the unconscious figure on the bed. The wounded man was slight of build and his clothes were also rich and of the finest tailoring. Glenn knew these people were from the East, Washington or Richmond, or even from farther north, Boston or Philadelphia; and he wondered by what quirk of fate they had been dumped into this border settlement on the edge of nowhere.

CROSSING the room, Glenn motioned the girl aside. She fell back and watched as, with deft fingers, he made a crude bandage and tied it in place with a piece of cloth. The girl looked on in surprise. But a moment before this young giant had come leaping out of the blackness to fell one man with his fist and to kill the other with his tomahawk. He had fought like a snarling wild-cat. Now those same huge sun-burned hands which had wreaked such havoc against greater odds, were binding up her father's wound with all the dexterity and gentleness of a trained surgeon.

He had seemed tall out there in the darkness, but she saw now that he was slightly under six feet. His commanding appearance was in the proud tilt of his head, the great breadth of his shoulders and the depth of his barrel-like chest. He was dressed all in buckskin, fringed leggins and hunting shirt, and with a coon-skin cap atop his head, bushy tail hanging down behind. From the leather belt about his waist hung a scalping knife on the left side, the tomahawk on the right. Above the tomahawk, slung from his left shoulder, was a bullet pouch and powder horn. But it was at his stern, hawk-like face the girl stared the longest. Character was stamped there and an intelligence utterly lacking in the friendly and flatter features of the settlers.

Glenn Hardy was well aware of her close scrutiny as she stood beside him, watching his every move. When he was finished he rose to his feet. The girl held out her hand.

"Thank you," she said simply, then added. "My name is Nancy Durham. My father is John Durham."

Glenn took her hand in his. It felt slim and cool against his palm and he held it until she pulled away, eyes dropping in sudden confusion.

"I'm Glenn Hardy," he said, then asked her pointblank. "Why did those men jump your father that way?"

The girl's eyes came up and she an-

swered vaguely. "I don't know—unless they might have learned he was carrying a considerable sum of money. There were some rough-looking men around when father paid Mr. Butler for our passage through Kentucky."

Glenn Hardy frowned. "Do you mean Lige Butler?" he asked. "You were paying him to pilot you across Kentucky?"

The girl nodded. "He's taking a pack train out in the morning. We're going with him."

Glenn's frown became a scowl. He knew all about that pack train and Lige Butler. He had hired on as scout himself only a few hours ago. As a matter of fact he had been ordered by his superiors in Washington to destroy the train and Lige Butler with it. But having this girl and her father along, he thought, would only complicate matters. Then he glanced at the old man on the bed and the tenseness went out of him.

"You mean you were going," Glenn said and nodded over his shoulder. "Your father won't be able to travel for at least a month."

He saw her look of disappointment, then the sudden determination flashing in her gray eyes.

"I'll go without him then," she said in a firm voice. "He'll follow when he's well."

Glenn opened his mouth to reply but was cut short by a feeble cry from the bed. Turning, he saw John Durham struggling onto his elbow, one hand outstretched toward his daughter.

"No," he gasped and plucked with trembling fingers at the girl's shoulder as she flew to his side. "You can't do that, Nancy. I forbid you. Our mission isn't worth it."

Pressing her father gently back onto the bed, Nancy Durham stood up and clenched her small fists. Glenn wondered what mission the old man was talking about. Then the girl spoke and he couldn't help but admire her courage.

"I'm going," she said firmly, "so please don't try and stop me."

The old man's face was white and drawn. His eyes sought Glenn's beseechingly. With a shrug the young borderer turned to Nancy.

"Your father's right," he said. "The wilderness is no place for a lone girl like you."

The girl swung on him furiously. "I can't see that it's any of your business," she snapped coldly. "You speak of Kentucky as though it were some frightful place."

"It is," Glenn answered, "to those of us who know it."

She paid him scant attention. "Besides, Mr. Butler is a gentleman and he will see that no harm comes to me."

Glenn's lips pursed into a straight line. "Lige Butler is no gentleman," he said quietly. "He's a renegade and a thief. He's clever and that's the only reason he wasn't hanged long ago."

With an angry toss of her head Nancy Durham turned and knelt beside her father. Glenn stood for a moment looking down at her in perplexity. The last thing in the world he wanted was to have her with the pack train tomorrow. He had his orders and he would have to carry them out as scheduled. And when he did he couldn't be responsible for her safety.

PICKING up his gun, the young borderer stepped out into the chill night and made his way down the empty wagon road to his camp on a low rise on the outskirts of the settlement. There was little to be gained by staying in the cabin. A feeling of antagonism had sprung up between himself and the girl and he knew anything else he might say would fall on deaf ears.

Throwing some fresh logs onto the fire, Glenn crawled into his blankets and laid his rifle beside him. High up on the mountain-side a dog yelped mournfully. Below him lay the slumbering settlement with the moonlit surface of the river gleaming beyond. For half an hour Glenn lay there, staring into the crackling flames as he thought over the events that had led to his meeting with Nancy Durham.

In Richmond he had received his orders to track down and stop a certain shipment of arms and ammunition bound for the Ohio. Glenn held a captaincy in the army. He had done work in Virginia and Pennsylvania, but for twelve years, ever since he was a boy of fifteen, he had roamed through Kentucky and Tennessee and as far north as the Western Reserve, acting as scout for the Federal Government. This last mission was the most dangerous he had yet been asked to do.

Glenn knew beyond doubt that the pack train which Nancy Durham was determined to join was the one he had orders to stop. It was to carry some twenty pack loads of arms and ammunition to the Ohio, there to meet Aaron Burr. Glenn had been hearing a lot about Aaron Burr in the past few months. The former statesman and murderer of Alexander Hamilton was supposed to be heading down the Ohio with his small army in a flotilla of boats, intent on their mad scheme of revolutionizing the Southwest and disuniting the Union. Accounts varied as to the true strength of the plotters. It was rumored that Andrew Jackson was giving his support and that Merry, Ambassador from England, had promised help from the English king. Glenn didn't know, but of one thing he was sure. Lige Butler's pack train would not get through to augment the forces of Burr's traitorous rebellion. Thinking of these things and of Nancy Durham, and hoping that she would change her mind and remain with her father at Powell's River, Glenn dropped slowly off to sleep.

BUT the next morning Glenn knew his hopes had been in vain. In the first faint flush of dawn he made his way down the rise and through the settlement. Ahead of him, picking her way through scattered tree stumps, he could make out the slight figure of Nancy Durham. She had changed from the silken splendor of civilization to the homespun of the frontier. A cloak was thrown about her shoulders and a shawl was on her head. As he strode up beside her she turned with a startled gasp.

"Oh, it's you," she said, and smiled in relief. "You frightened me."

"You're going?" Glenn asked.

She nodded. "If you've come to dissuade me," she answered. "You'll only be wasting your time. I've made up my mind."

Glenn shrugged his shoulders lightly. "That wasn't my intention," he answered. "I'm going with you. I'm acting as Butler's scout."

Nancy looked up sharply and for a moment stared at him intently. Relief swept away the anxiety that had clouded her eyes. She hadn't admitted it to her father but she had been frightened at the thought of traveling alone with Lige Butler and his crew of ruffians. Now she was glad that this young borderer was going with them. He was young—not much older then herself—but he seemed big and strong and capable and his eyes were clear and honest.

Shouts and the stamp of horses' feet sounded ahead of them through the trees and a moment later they came upon Butler's camp at the edge of the trail. Lige Butler himself was standing at the head of a string of horses, gesticulating with his arms and directing his men at the loading of the packs. He was a big, brutal-faced man with red-rimmed eyes and a shaggy gray beard. He was dressed in buckskin and a wide slouch hat.

"Well?" he bellowed as Glenn and Nancy emerged from the shadows and stood beside him. "Where's your father, ma'm? We've gotta git goin' purty quick."

"He isn't coming," Nancy replied, and fell back a pace before the other's rude appraising glance. "I'm going without him."

With a start Lige Butler lifted his gaze to her face. Glenn saw the sudden gleam in the man's smoldering eyes and his fingers curled instinctively about the barrel of his rifle. No more was said then and a half hour later the pack train was in motion, heading up the trail for Cumberland Gap.

Striding in the lead with Lige Butler next and Nancy Durham astride a scrawny mare, Glenn led the long line of snorting horses up the trace that wound and twisted through banks of laurel and shining rhododendron. He glanced back once and looked out over the peaceful valley below where the first golden rays of the morning sun were chasing away the mists that swirled along the river-bed. Storm clouds hung darkly over the naked crags and wooded slopes of the ridge overhead, and as they mounted steadily higher and at last passed through the Gap, a few flakes of snow sifted down through the pines and fell softly in their path.

Glenn knew the way perfectly. They were following the Wilderness Road laid out by Boone a quarter of a century before. And late that afternoon they paused on the edge of a precipice to catch their first glimpse of Kentucky, the "dark and bloody ground" where no Indians dwelt,

but all tribes came to wage their wars and hunt the wild game that roamed the forest trails. For two days they wound their way down the western slope of the Cumberland Range, traveling beneath a canopy of pine and oak and coming at last to the Cumberland River where trees were felled and log rafts were built to ferry their cargo across the tumbling waters. And on the west bank camp was made that night.

As he knelt beside the fire cooking supper of ash-cakes and a turkey he had killed earlier in the day, Glenn Hardy watched Nancy Durham out of the corner of his eye. She was seated beside Lige Butler. Glenn frowned. He and Nancy had spoken together only once since they had left the settlement at Powell's River. She seemed to prefer Butler's company to his, talking to the big renegade mysteriously and in low tones.

Nancy Durham herself was something of a mystery to Glenn. He couldn't understand what mission could be so important as to bring her here into the wilds of the border country. The one time he had talked to her he had tried to draw her out with questions, but she had deftly and with great firmness turned the conversation into other channels. Her being here troubled him. His original plans for destroying the pack train were useless now. Nor could he think of a new one that would serve the purpose and at the same time not endanger her life.

With a low curse Glenn Hardy rose to his feet and stared after Nancy and Lige Butler who were strolling out of the firelight toward the river. One of the men made a low remark and the other six laughed coarsely as they turned and winked at each other knowingly. Taking his rifle, Glenn moved silently into the forest, circled and headed for the river. It was none of his business what the girl did, but he couldn't bring himself to believe she would go off with Lige Butler that way if she knew his true character.

Pushing through the cane brakes bordering the river, Glenn suddenly sank to the ground and held his breath, listening. Muttered voices sounded off to his left and he crept nearer, moving soundlessly downstream. Then he paused as Nancy's voice rose over the thicket behind which he was crouching.

"You wanted to see me about something," she was saying. "What is it?"

Lige Butler rumbled something in reply, then Glenn leaped to his feet as Nancy's scream rang through the forest. Bounding through the thicket the young scout rounded a giant tree into a small cleared space and hurled himself on Butler who was encircling the girl with clawing arms and struggling to reach her lips with his own. Even as he hurled through the air Glenn sensed something familiar in that broad buckskin back. And when he spun Butler around and sent his fists pounding against a bearded face and bone-hard body, he knew for sure that the man he was fighting now was the man he had fought that night behind the cabins on Powell's River.

WITH rights and lefts he drove the snarling Butler to his knees. Butler was lunging to his feet. This would be a fight to the finish and Glenn's blood raced with the thrill of battle.

Moving warily, the two men circled, watching for an opening. Lige Butler had drawn his knife. Nancy Durham had shrunk back against a tree trunk. But of a sudden she ran forward and stood between them, facing Glenn.

"No," she cried. "Don't, I beg of you, Not now!"

She flung around on Butler.

"Please put up your knife. You mustn't fight, now or ever."

For a long minute the three of them stood poised. Then Glenn Hardy straightened. And at that instant a sneering voice floated out of the blackness at his back.

"That's right, girlie. Now I'll have the pleasure of killin' 'em both."

Every muscle in Glenn's body tightened at the sound of that voice. Butler's knife slipped to the ground. Eyes narrowing, Glenn Hardy spun slowly on his heel.

Standing in the moonlight a dozen feet away was the tallest and the thinnest man he had ever seen. The stranger's buckskins were in rags. His head and beard were matted and dirty. His cruel lips were a thin slit in a flat, brutal face. He held a rifle waist high and its muzzle was weaving slowly back and forth between Glenn and Lige Butler.

"Put up yer hands, all of yer," the

stranger snarled, "an' keep 'em there."

Glenn slowly obeyed. There was little else to do. He could hear Nancy's quick breathing behind him. If he fought she would be directly in the line of fire. For a full minute they stood in silence, waiting. Glenn guessed what was happening. The stranger was like a statue. But his rifle never wavered. Then abruptly a single shot in the distance shattered the forest stillness.

A rasping chuckle rose from the stranger's throat as the echo of the shot boomed and reverberated up the river. Glenn had known this man wasn't alone. His confederates were attacking the camp. With a sinking heart Glenn realized they were river-pirates, one of those gangs of outlaws which were infesting the southern territories, robbing settlers and river craft, killing for the pure joy of seeing men die.

Ten long minutes dragged into twenty. Lige Butler hadn't stirred, nor had Nancy Durham. Glenn swiveled his head to the left and measured the distance to the nearest tree with his eye. It was twenty paces. Too far. The cane-brakes were to his right but they afforded little protection. His rifle was on the ground in a thicket out of sight. If he could reach that, he thought, but saw with a frown that it was to the rear of the outlaw.

Then suddenly an owl hooted out in the forest. And a minute later the brush at either side of the lone stranger parted and four equally shaggy men slipped into the open and stood beside their leader.

"Well?" the outlaw growled.

"Guns an' ammunition," a man grunted. "No money. We better git."

A savage curse ripped out from between the leader's clenched teeth. "Git goin' then," he snarled and motioned with his rifle. "But that gal there goes with us."

Glenn heard Nancy's gasp of horror and felt the blood freezing in his veins. He had hoped the outlaws would take the guns and ammunition. That would end his job. He had hoped they might even kill Lige Butler, saving him the trouble and ridding the border of a renegade. He didn't even care if they shot him. He was a man. But Nancy in their clutches!

Glenn drew a deep breath to stop the pounding in his heart. He flexed his muscles that were growing numb with fear for the girl. Then as two of the river men stepped forward at their leader's command, he turned his head an inch and whispered over his shoulder:

"Drop to the ground, Nancy! Drop!"

But she didn't seem to hear. She was standing there in terror. And the men were almost on them.

"Down, Nancy, down!" he shouted, and then he leaped.

Straight for the two men he sprang, his hands clawing frantically for the scalping knife and tomahawk in his belt. The outlaws stopped in startled surprise and their rifles swung up. But they were a fraction of a second too late. A knife blade flashed in the moonlight. The sound of it striking was lost in the roar of a gun. Glenn flinched as the powder-smoke burned his neck. Then his tomahawk whistled through the air and crunched into bone and flesh, cleaving the second man's bearded face from forehead through nose to chin.

THE outlaw uttered a low gurgle as the blood poured down into his throat. He presented a hideous spectacle wobbling on his feet with the hatchet jutting out from the center of his face. One man was down. But Glenn's wild charge never paused. Catching the second under the arms as he fell, the young borderer swung him into the air and flung him at the last two who had started forward at a shrill yell from their leader.

Glenn dropped to the ground. A bullet snarled over his head as a rifle cracked. Then he was up and diving for the bearded leader who raised his smoking gun and sprang forward to meet him with a snarl. In a long deadly arc the rifle swung down. Glen ducked, leaped to one side. The outlaw was off balance and Glenn closed in.

With a savage wrench he tore the heavy flintlock from the man's grasp, whirled it over his head and down. The outlaw uttered a shrill cry, toppled over backwards and lay still. Glenn whirled and sprang back into the center of the clearing. Lige Butler was standing over the two remaining bandits who lay on their backs, a dripping knife clutched in his right fist. Nancy Durham was on her knees, both hands spread over her face to shut out the gruesome bodies sprawled along the ground before her.

Going to her side, Glenn helped her gently to her feet. Despite all efforts to control himself, Glenn Hardy was trembling in every limb. He had been crazed with fury, mad with the lust for blood. But it was all over now and the reaction had set in and he turned away from Nancy that she might not see the revulsion in his face.

Returning to camp, Lige Butler found his drivers bound to separate trees with the pack ropes. Two were dead, one with a bullet hole in his back, the other with a knife half protruding from his neck. A decent burial was given the five outlaws and the two borderers that night. Nothing more was said by either Glenn or Lige Butler about their fight. But the next morning Glenn Hardy walked beside Nancy's horse at her own request.

FOR a week they pushed through the wilderness, passing an occasional settlement or coming suddenly upon a clearing in the forest where a scrawny family of pioneers would run out from their cabin to meet and ply them with questions of the outside world. But these habitations grew fewer and farther between as the pack train pressed steadily westward toward the Cumberland River which looped down into Tennessee, then flowed back across Kentucky to join the Ohio at Fort Massac. It was double work for them now that two of their number were dead and Nancy Durham herself pitched in with a will and helped with the loading and unloading of the packs.

At times they passed through forests that were gloomy and dark as night. At others they marched across sunlit valleys where the dried grass grew waist high and deer and turkey ran before their approach. But for the most part Glenn held to the ridges and the river beds where old buffalo roads made traveling far easier.

"The buffalo and the elk are gone," he told Nancy one day, "and the Indians—almost."

From her horse the girl looked down at him striding along by her side. "Why do you say almost?" she asked at last. "Are there still some around?"

Glenn shifted his rifle to his other shoulder. "I cut sign this morning," he said quietly. "A hunting party, most likely. There were perhaps about twenty of them."

"Did you tell Mr. Butler?"

Glenn nodded.

"What did he say?"

"He laughed."

Nancy saw his lips press into a firm white line. "Is there any danger?" she asked.

Glenn Hardy shrugged. "I don't know," he replied and a frown spread slowly across his lean face. "Years ago this country was infested with Indians coming to hunt and wage their wars; Cherokees and Creeks from the south, Shawnees and Delawares from the north across the Ohio. They made it hard for Boone and the early hunters. Then the settlers came pouring into Tennessee and Ohio and the Indians were driven west toward the Mississippi and Missouri."

Glenn paused and looked up at the girl. She was leaning slightly forward in the saddle, her lips parted and her eyes fixed intently on his.

"Tecumseh and his twin brother, 'The Prophet,' are exciting the Shawnees and Delawares to make war," Glenn continued. "At least, that's what I heard, and though I don't know how much truth there is in the rumor, it pays to be careful. Lige Butler is either blind or a fool. I can't make out which."

"You haven't quarreled with him again?"

Glenn shook his head. "No, not yet."

Leaning down suddenly, Nancy Durham gripped his shoulder. "Don't. Please don't," she cried. "For my sake, Glenn, don't fight Lige Butler. Promise me you won't."

Glenn Hardy frowned. "I can't do that," he said, his face growing stern. "When Butler's ready, we'll fight. There's no way out."

Nancy drew back angrily. Her hands clenched fiercely at her sides.

"Why do you have to be like that?" she cried. "You—Butler—this horrible country—everyone I've met out here—you're all the same. You're like the savages—harsh and cruel."

Glenn's eyes swept down along the ridge to a herd of deer grazing in the valley below.

"Yes, we're harsh and cruel," he answered thoughtfully. "We have to be, Nancy. We're at war here on the border;

at war amongst ourselves, against the Indians and with the wilderness, any one of which would swallow us up in a second if we didn't keep one jump ahead of it."

With a murmured apology Glenn turned and strode down the line of horses strung out behind. Nancy could hear him shouting to the men, ordering them to "close up, close up the gaps there." She knew he was right. The frontier had no place for the weak. In Glenn she saw the true pioneer; restless and roving as compared with the settler who was content to follow in the hunter's footsteps and cultivate the soil wrested by him from the wilderness. Glenn, she realized, would never be happy unless he were pushing on in search of new lands to conquer.

For the following two days the young borderer led his party down a winding, bush-strewn valley. He didn't speak to Nancy of it, for fear of alarming her unnecessarily, but twice in that time he found unmistakable evidence of the presence of Indians. They were all about them, probably at the moment watching from the ridge-tops on either side.

"Huntin' party," Lige Butler had growled when Glenn told him. "What's the matter, feller, y' skeered of 'em?"

Glenn took a step forward, fists clenching. Every muscle in his body ached with the desire to lash out and beat the renegade's sneering face into a mass of pulp. But Nancy was watching them, pleading with her eyes, and he turned and strode off without a word.

LATE the next afternoon they came upon the Cumberland at a spot Glenn estimated to be thirty miles from the Ohio. They camped on the eastern bank at the edge of the forest and in a grassy meadow nearby unpacked their horses and tethered them for the night. Long after the others had rolled up in their blankets, Glenn sat beside the fire, moodily thinking. Not ten feet from him Nancy Durham lay sleeping. He could see the gentle rise and fall of her blankets as she breathed. A horse nickered softly to his left. On his right he could make out the dim shape of the guard as he leaned on his rifle and peered off into the blackness of the night.

Ever since they had left Powell's River Glenn had been trying to devise some means of stopping the pack train. He had put it off as long as he could, for Nancy's sake. If anything happened to him he knew she would be at the mercy of Lige Butler. But tomorrow, or the day after at least, their long journey would be over and the munitions in Aaron Burr's hands, unless something was done about it tonight.

Then suddenly, like a flash, a plan came to Glenn Hardy and a faint smile spread slowly across his weather-beaten face. It was a simple plan. He would merely set the horses free, making it appear as though they had been stolen by the Indians. Then he would go to Fort Massac, taking Nancy with him, and return with some soldiers for the contraband.

Rolling over, Glenn crawled slowly away from the fire. A figure stirred in its blankets and he froze. Then he crept on again, sliding his rifle ahead of him along the ground. Rising to his feet as he gained the protection of the darkness, he turned and ran silently toward the horses. It was a dark and moonless night and there was a smell of rain in the air. Slipping by the packs which had been heaped in a pile to one side, he stepped amongst the horses and stood there for a moment to enable them to catch his scent and know he was a friend. Then he stooped and cut the nearest picket rope. Five times he did this, then suddenly froze at a faint scraping noise behind him.

WHIRLING, Glenn snapped his flintlock to his shoulder, his finger squeezing about the trigger.

"Glenn!" a voice called almost at his elbow.

With a gasp Glenn let the butt of his gun fall to the ground. "Nancy!" he choked, springing forward. "God, I almost shot you."

He seized her by the shoulders with his free hand and she came in close to peer up into his face and grip the fringe of his hunting shirt with both small fists. He could feel her trembling.

"Glenn!" she whispered hoarsely. "What are you doing here?"

Her gaze went past his shoulder to the five horses which were drifting off into the night.

"You set them free?" she asked faintly.

Glenn nodded. "Yes. And the others must go too."

"But why?" she cried. "Tell me, Glenn, why? Who are you?"

Taking her by the arm, Glenn led her out from between the horses and made her sit on one of the packs. Beyond her the camp fire glowed warmly.

"You might as well know the truth," he said, sitting down beside her. "I'm a captain in the United States Army. These guns and the ammunition are for Aaron Burr. I've been ordered to stop them from getting through to the Ohio where Butler expects to meet Burr."

Glenn felt a shiver run up along his spine as Nancy pulled sharply away from him.

"You!" she gasped. "A spy!"

"Not exactly," Glenn answered. "You forget that Aaron Burr is a traitor."

"That's what you Americans think," she retorted hotly. "But it happens that we don't."

Glenn sucked in his breath softly. "We?" he echoed dully. "What do you mean, Nancy?"

Nancy Durham hesitated. "I mean that I'm English," she said finally. "My father and some of his friends pooled what little money they had to support Burr's cause. Father and I came to America to handle it. This pack train is ours. We paid for it and I must see that it gets safely through to Mr. Burr."

Reaching up, Glenn took off his coonskin cap and ran trembling fingers through his long hair. He felt dazed, shocked at this last bit of news.

"I'm sorry things had to turn out this way," he said at last. "I'm an American, Nancy, and these guns will never get to Burr."

"You're a rebel," she shot back fiercely, "and they will go through. If you set any more of the horses free I'll call Mr. Butler."

Glenn's head came up. Nancy sat waiting for his answer. But Glenn was peering into the darkness and listening. They had been talking in whispers. Now the horses had suddenly become restless and he felt a vague uneasiness stealing over him. Then a twig snapped off in the forest to their left and at the same instant Nancy Durham opened her mouth to speak. Reaching up, Glenn flattened his hand over her lips.

"Sh," he breathed in her ear. "Be quiet."

Nancy began to struggle, making little guttural noises in her throat.

"Be quiet," Glenn hissed. "I hear something. The horses are acting queer, the way they always do when—"

Glenn's whisper trailed off into silence. Nancy's face was only an inch from his and she could see the white line of his teeth as they clenched, lips parted. He was scarcely breathing, his body taut as wire, and she slowly relaxed and fell silent.

For more than a minute they sat there motionless. Glenn's eyes pierced the darkness at either side, his head pivoting in a slow circle. Three hundred yards away through the trees he could see the fire and the lone sentry. The horses were moving restlessly in the open meadow. One whinnied.

Then abruptly Glenn saw the bushes between him and the firelight sway to one side. It was no more than a faint rustle. But a feathered head rose slowly into sight, then a pair of buckskin-clad shoulders and the long barrel of a rifle.

A crawling sensation played along the base of Glenn's spine as he stared at the broad back of the Indian. Here was one, but he wondered how many more there were crawling through the forest to attack the sleeping camp.

With his hand Glenn turned Nancy's head. He felt her start as she caught sight of the crouching savage and he tightened the grip over her mouth to stifle the sharp cry he knew would burst from her lips. Then he drew her noiselessly to the ground.

"Stay here," he breathed. "Don't move until I tell you to."

Rising to his full height, Glenn picked up his rifle which he had left leaning against the packs. He was afraid, not for himself but for Nancy, and he cursed himself bitterly for ever allowing her to come on this trip into the wilderness.

WHIRLING, he faced the savage. The Indian was standing erect. He was slightly turned so that the firelight played across his hawk-like face. It was a hideously painted face, with cruel lips

and a flat, twisted nose. A single feather stuck up out of long black hair. Tomahawk and scalping knife dangled from his belt. Slipping out of the underbrush, the Indian darted behind a tree. Slowly, an inch at a time, his rifle came up. He dropped to one knee and rested his chin against the stock. Then he took careful and deliberate aim at the unsuspecting guard.

Throwing his rifle to his shoulder, Glenn fired. With a shrill scream the savage leaped into the air, his flint-lock clattering against the tree trunk. He took two crazy drunken steps, then flopped on his face, rolled over once and lay still.

For an instant there was absolute silence. Then with a roar the forest came to life. Yells of savage rage rose out of the bushes at either hand. Tongues of flame licked through the night. Bullets whistled overhead. Glenn dropped to his knees to reload. Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of Butler and his men leaping from their blankets. They were running about in confusion, catching up their guns. One man staggered, went down and sprawled across the fire. His hair burst into flame. He screamed but he lay there writhing. Nancy sat up to look. She uttered a stifled cry and Glenn pushed her roughly back.

Dropping a handful of bullets into his mouth, Glenn rammed one home, primed and cocked his rifle.

"Over here," he shouted. "Butler—you men—all of you! Over here! Get away from that fire!"

Lifting his rifle, Glenn fired at a shadow flitting behind a tree. In answer to his cry Butler and his men came crashing through the underbrush, and flopped behind the packs. Then abruptly the firing ceased and the war-whoops died away into silence. Glenn crouched beside Nancy, reloading his smoking gun.

"Have they gone?" she asked in a small voice.

Lige Butler grunted. "They've gone all right, but they'll be back."

"We'll have to wait until daylight," Glenn said, "then make a run for it."

"What about the guns and ammunition?" Nancy asked. "We can't leave them."

"We'll have to," Glenn answered shortly. "They'd slow us up too much."

AT the first tinge of dawn several hours later Glenn Hardy rose and disappeared into the forest. If possbile he wanted to determine how many of the savages there were. Skirting the meadow, he crept silently through the brush, up a ravine and along a ridge until he could look down over the tree tops and into open clearings. He lay there for half an hour as the light grew stronger and the day came. Low-hung clouds swept across the morning sky and a flake or two of snow drifted along with the wind that came sighing down from the north. The forest seemed empty and oddly peaceful. But Glenn knew different. Out there somewhere were the Indians. Danger lurked behind every tree. Death was in every shadow. At any moment Glenn expected to hear a shot or the dread war-cry of the Shawnees. But no sound came and at last he circled the camp and returned to the meadow. Slipping out of the cane-brakes along the river, he suddenly stiffened.

Lige Butler, Nancy and the four remaining drivers were standing by the horses, facing him. In his absence they had loaded all the packs but five which lay on the ground at Butler's feet.

"Well?" the renegade sneered as the young scout stopped before him. "There's five horses missing. Miss Durham sez the Injuns took 'em. I think different."

Glenn looked at Nancy, who turned her eyes down before his level gaze. Butler's hand was stealing toward his knife.

"I shoulda slit yer gullet long ago," he snarled. "I'd do it now only we'll be needin' yer before the day's over."

Glenn pursed his lips. "All right," was all he said. "We'd better get goin'. It's thirty miles to the Ohio."

Airing a short laugh, Butler turned and motioned to his men. With whip and gun-butt they leaped forward and lashed the snorting pack horses into a fast trot. Glenn led the way again with Nancy stumbling along behind him. He wouldn't let her ride. Sitting up on her mare she was too easy a target for some savage's bullet. Along the river-bank they went, following a dim trail between the cane-brakes and the gloomy forest, up over a rise and down the opposite slope to splash across a creek and race up another slope, casting swift glances over their shoulders to see if they were be-

ing followed. It had begun to drizzle when they left. Now it was pouring, soaking them through to the skin.

Nancy saw them first. "Indians!" she cried.

THEN they came, a howling, shrieking mob of savages, leaping out of the brush on all sides at once. Glenn fired, saw one drop, felt an arrow graze his cheek. Flinging Nancy to the ground, he stood over her as a dark shape hurtled down out of a tree to his left. Swinging his rifle in a short arc, Glenn caught the shape in mid-air. Steel crunched against bone and the Indian went down. But another took his place, a shrieking devil with tomahawk upraised. Again Glenn's rifle barrel whistled through the air and the savage fell.

Glancing over his shoulder, Glenn saw the horses rearing and plunging and Lige Butler struggling with two of the Indians. At the rear of the train were more Indians and three borderers. One driver was dead, lying on the wet grass, a knife sticking up out of his chest.

Leaping into the thick of the fray, Glenn swung his rifle right and left. He was everywhere at once, lunging, striking, fighting silently and with deadly effect. Foot by foot the five white men drove back three times their number of yelling demons. Then all at once the battle ended as the Indians turned and fled.

Running back to Nancy, Glenn helped her to her feet, then he strode down the line of horses, quieting them with a word and a gentle touch. When he returned Lige Butler was bending over a fallen Indian. He made a long circular motion with his knife and straightening, held up a bleeding scalp. Covering her face with her hands, Nancy swayed and would have fallen if Glenn hadn't caught her by the shoulders and steadied her. For a second she rested against his chest and he looked down with pity into her drawn face. She was cold and wet and bedraggled. She had come through hell in the past ten days. She was worn and frightened and filled with horror. But her spirit was not broken.

Closing up the pack horses, Glenn took the lead once again as they sped along the river in their mad race for the Ohio. All that morning and part of the afternoon the Indians hung on their flanks, harrying them continually but never attacking in force. Then suddenly through the mist and driving rain Glenn made out a dozen or so white men running through the grass toward them. Ten minutes later they panted up and fell in beside Lige Butler, who drew them quickly aside out of earshot. Glenn caught occasional snatches of their conversation, enough at least to tell him that they were some of Aaron Burr's men and that Burr himself was encamped on a small island at the mouth of the Cumberland, only a mile or so ahead.

WITH a final burst of shots that came droning angrily through the branches overhead, the Indians melted away into the forest, yelling defiantly at their enemies. Butler took the lead and half an hour later they were standing on the river shore, staring out across the rain-swollen waters of the Ohio. A flatboat was drawn up along the bank at the mouth of the Cumberland. Beside it was a sloop, its sails flapping in the gusty wind. Glenn helped Nancy into this as the men began unloading the packs. She suddenly gripped the sleeve of his hunting shirt.

"You've lost," she said quietly. "What are you going to do now, Glenn?"

Glenn Hardy shrugged. "Go along with you, I guess. Maybe Burr can use an extra 'rebel.' The army won't want me after this."

Glenn thought he saw a frown puckering Nancy's brow. He hesitated, staring down at her as she sat there in the sloop, both hands clutching the mast as the small craft rolled and tossed with the waves. Then, when she didn't answer, he turned and dropping into the flatboat which lay alongside, he helped carry the packs aboard and pile them in a corner of the cabin. When they were finished Glenn stood in the open doorway of the flatboat cabin and watched as the lines were cut loose and the men bent their backs to the long sweeps, swinging the clumsy craft toward a wooded island looming faintly across the water. A hundred yards up-river he could see the sloop skipping nimbly through the waves. Nancy was seated in the bow. There were two men with her.

Backing out of sight, Glenn ran across the cabin and dropping to his knees, ripped

open one of the packs. With a sharp blow of his tomahawk he broke open a powder-keg. Another followed and in a minute the fine grains spread over the floor in a black mound. He could hear the pound of feet and the shouts of the men outside. There wasn't much time, he realized. This was his last chance.

Scooping up a handful of powder, Glenn poured it along the floor in a straight line to the door, glanced out. Sleet and rain beat against his face. He looked at the river and shivered. Then he seized his rifle and emptying the pan, thumbed back the heavy hammer. For a second he paused. It would be murder, he thought, not to warn the men. So leaping into the open, he yelled at Butler, who was standing in the stern.

"Fire!" he shouted. "Jump for your lives!"

Butler whirled, gun snapping to his shoulder. Darting back into the cabin, Glenn stooped and held his rifle sideways to the powder-train. His finger closed around the trigger and squeezed. There was a click as flint struck steel, then a blinding flash and a puff of smoke as the powder caught.

Springing up, Glenn flung his rifle into a corner. An orange ball of flame was sizzling along the floor toward the packs. Gritting his teeth Glenn charged into the open. A bullet zipped by his shoulder. The roar of the shot boomed in his ears. Drawing a deep breath, he climbed onto the wooden railing and dove over the side.

DOWN into the yellow waters of the Ohio he sank. Flushed by snow and freezing rains to the north, it was cold as ice. The sudden shock made Glenn gasp and his mouth filled with water. His body writhed. But with long, powerful strokes he swam through blackness until specks whirled before his eyes and his lungs seemed ready to burst. Then he rose to the surface and sucked in a deep breath.

A wave slapped against his face. Treading water, he peered at the flatboat. The swift current had carried him out of danger. The craft was a hundred yards away. Men were leaping from the decks and roof. Heads bobbed in the water roundabout.

Then, with a sudden roar, the roof of the flatboat rose into the air and split into a thousand pieces. A sheet of flame shot up and a cloud of smoke spread slowly across the river. Glenn watched in awe as the flatboat settled in the water, suddenly sank from sight with a hiss of burning timbers.

Clinging to a snag, Glenn floated with the current. The sloop had come about and he could see Lige Butler just climbing over the side. The other men in the water were making for a third boat which had put out from the island and was bearing down on them rapidly. Glenn suddenly stiffened. With one blow of his fist Butler had toppled the sloop's helmsman into the water, turned on the second man with arm upraised. Glenn saw the two men grapple, heard Nancy's scream above the rush of wind and rain. Then Butler's arm flashed down and the borderer fell.

Whirling, Butler leaped for the tiller and swung the sloop about. Its sails filled and it headed downstream with the wind. Glenn watched it in stunned surprise. Butler was sailing away from the island and the floundering men in the water. It could mean only one thing. With the blowing up of the flatboat his job was done. Now he was fleeing with Nancy Durham.

As the truth slowly dawned on him Glenn Hardy began to swim. Putting every last ounce of strength into the broad sweep of his arms and the kicks of his legs, he raced through the water to cut off the sloop. For a hundred yards he raced through the water.

Spray flying from before its prow, the slim craft drew closer. It was fifty feet away—then forty—thirty—ten. The bow drew alongside. The smooth sides brushed Glenn's shoulder. Then, as the stern slid abreast, Glenn Hardy rose in the water. Reaching up, he grasped the wet planks and with a savage heave, wriggled over the side and into the boat.

LUNGING forward, the big renegade whipped out his knife. Glenn sidestepped his first wild dash, came up and lashed out furiously with his fists, sent the glittering knife spinning over the side.

Closing in with his gorilla arms outstretched, Lige Butler seized Glenn in a vise-like grip. The renegade was a bearded madman, snarling and fighting like a beast.

Glenn felt the wind being slowly squeezed out of him. The other's hot breath was panting against his neck. There was one chance left to Glenn. Reaching up from behind, his finger clamped around Butler's throat. At the same time he braced one foot against the centerboard. Butler's grip loosened, and the young borderer drew a gasping breath. Then Glenn flung his weight forward and with one desperate heave toppled them both over the side into the water.

As they sank beneath the river, Butler's grip came free. He rolled and thrashed out wildly, fighting to gain the surface. Glenn held him down, dragging him to the bottom by one foot. A fist crashed against his head. But it didn't seem to hurt so much. He was already numbed with cold and exhaustion. Again the fist sank into his face and chest. Glenn hung on grimly. He knew his only chance was to drown Lige Butler.

Suddenly the big man's struggles weakened. His blows lacked power, grew irregular. Glenn's lungs felt as though they would collapse. For ten endless seconds he hung on, then as Butler's body sank, he shot to the surface.

Gasping in great lungfuls of fresh air, Glenn watched the surface of the river. A head popped up and he swam toward it. It disappeared, came up again downstream and floated away with the current, face down.

Rolling over on his back, Glenn caught sight of the sloop bearing down on him, Nancy at the tiller. In a minute she was coming about and helping him crawl over the side. Glenn lay on the floor boards, breathing hard, his wet body shaking with the cold. Reaching into a locker along the floor boards, Nancy drew out some blankets and covering him, tossed one about her own shoulders. With a groan Glenn pulled himself up and sitting down beside her, took the tiller.

"I'll take you back to Burr," he said, avoiding her gaze. He had blown up her father's guns and he guessed how she felt.

"And you?" Nancy asked. "Where will you go?"

Glenn shrugged. "West," he said shortly. "There's new territory out there beyond the Mississippi. I want to see it."

He broke off sharply at the touch of her hand on his arm. Turning, he looked down into her upturned face. There were tears in her eyes.

"Let me go with you," Nancy cried. "I want to see it too, Glenn. I want to be with you wherever you go."

Glenn felt a sudden wild joy spring up in his breast. For a moment he was too dazed to speak. Then he nodded.

"We'll stop at the next settlement and be married," he said softly. "Then we'll send for your father."

Nancy Durham smiled and with a sweep of his arm Glenn Hardy turned the prow of the sloop downstream toward a new life and a new frontier.

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The Life Story of a Frontier Badman

TWO men, Henry Plummer and Pat Ford, stood glaring at each other through the thickening tobacco-fog in Ford's saloon in the territorial capital of Lewiston, Idaho. This territory included all of Montana and Wyoming. It was the early '60's.

Henry Plummer had been speaking. Now, as he repeated his question, his slim hands swept toward his hips. This was the signal for booted and bearded miners to scoot for cover. There was murder in Plummer's cold eyes.

His words were crisp:

"So you think they ought to run me out of the territory? They! Well, Ford, who

are they? Maybe you're one of 'em?"

Ford never flinched. "We've had twenty killings in these gold gulches," he said quietly, "and I can't begin to tell you how many robberies. Them things speak for themselves."

Plummer's thin upper lip lifted. His sneer, presaging death, was not a pretty sight. He snarled:

"Go for your guns, Ford. No man can talk to me like that and live."

Ford snapped his fingers in Plummer's gray face. "I've got no gun on me," he said steadily, "but the next time you threaten me somebody's going to get hurt. Now pull your carcass out of my saloon and keep it out. Some day the Vigilante will hang you. And I hope I live to see it."

Henry Plummer, teetering on his small, smooth, neatly polished California boots, thrust his thumbs into his cartridge belt and leered at Ford.

"Coward," he said, with a sneer. "Just what I thought—a damned coward."

Joe Berry, Ford's night bartender, seized a sawed-off shotgun and threw down on Plummer.

"Outside," he snarled, "and if you ever come back in here I'll scatter your brains all over Lewiston. Git!"

Plummer backed toward the door. As he reached the narrow street another man came in. This was Jack Cleveland. He was swarthy, beetle-browed, half-drunk. Now he roared:

"What's this, Henry, on the run again? Maybe I better take a hand. And maybe I better not." Under his breath, he mumbled: "If they kill Plummer there'll be a new chief. And that's my chance."

But Joe Berry, the bartender, swept the shotgun in a threatening arc. He said:

"You get out, too, Jack Cleveland. You came to Lewiston about the same time Plummer did. Birds of a feather. Now, don't try to draw. If you do, I'll dump you in Boot Hill. Git."

The two killers "got." Outside, in the darkness, Jack Cleveland shoved his puffed face close to Plummer's gray mask and demanded:

"What's up, Henry? Are they on to us?"

But Plummer growled and hurried toward his cabin. He didn't want to talk to Jack Cleveland. He was afraid of this outlaw. Cleveland knew too much about Henry Plummer's past. Some day Cleveland would talk too much. Then he would surely die.

Inside the bar, Joe Berry said to his boss: "Pat Ford, you go heeled from this on. They'll kill you as sure as Satan."

But Ford laughed. "I never carry a gun unless I have to," he reminded Berry, "and I guess that half the fellers that do pack 'em haven't got the nerve to use 'em. I'm not afraid of Plummer and his killers."

"Just the same," Berry insisted, "you take a guard and your six-guns tomorrow when you start for your other saloon in Oro Fino. I've got some respect for them road-agents, whether they're Plummer's men or not, and I want you to be protected. They've killed Owens, Newton, old Steve Ornsby, Mike Monahan and a dozen others. You do as I say, play safe, and take no chances on Plummer or anybody else. You hear me?"

"Sure," Pat Ford grunted, but he was more interested in a little white dog. One of his dance-hall girls had brought it in, capering, and Ford was down on the floor playing with it. Whereupon Charley Reeves looked at Bill Ridgely and sneered. They were confederates of Henry Plummer.

HENRY PLUMMER knew he had to kill Pat Ford. This plain-spoken saloonkeeper had read Plummer like a book.

"We've got to get him," Plummer whispered to Charley Reeves and Bill Ridgely, "and no time is to be lost. You work it out between you. Then let me know."

This was the way Plummer worked in Lewiston. It was the way he had worked ever since he came West.

Just where Plummer came from, or why he left his Eastern habitat, was not definitely known. This man, credited with giving the orders which wiped out 102 human beings in the far West, was secretive and aloof. Many of his actions and all his deeper motives were shrouded in mystery.

He arrived in Lewiston from Walla Walla. With him, or closely following, came Bill Mayfield, Jack Cleveland, Bill Bunton, Cherokee Bob, Charley Harper, Clubfoot George Lane and twenty others of the killer breed. Plummer was chief. But he was mighty careful to keep this fact a secret.

Plummer was a gambler. Physically, he

was no giant. He missed six feet by two inches and he weighed less than 160. But he was erect, quick on his feet, an excellent dancer.

He had small hands and small feet. Those hands had delicate fingers. This man could draw and fire with amazing speed and demoralizing accuracy.

Plummer had a murderer's skull. His color was grayish, his cheeks thin; but his mouth was well-cut, indicating a measure of firmness.

His eyes were cold and glassy, a peculiar shade of gray, with a half-vacant stare. Unseeing, yet seeing all, they were strangely haunting—like the eyes of the dead.

Cruelty was reflected there. In those hard eyes, there was no pity, no laughter, no dancing merriment, to mark the man of sympathy.

Such eyes, in such a face, were a dead give-away. Death lurked there, and Henry Plummer knew it; and, knowing it, he made every effort to conceal it.

He wore a hat, where this was possible, and he kept its brim turned low over the tell-tale skull—that killer's skull—with the death-threat lurking in those glacial gray eyes.

Outwardly, Plummer was composed and wholly dispassionate. Ordinarily, he was cool as mercury; always thinking, usually suave and, invariably, outsmarting his adversaries. Here was the tranquil unhurried gambler with the poker face and the steel nerves.

Yet this mercurial nature could blaze with passion; for Henry Plummer, like Doc Holliday of Tombstone and Charley Bryant of Oklahoma, was at root a sickly man. And these sickly killers, as Western Marshals knew to their sorrow, were hell on earth when aroused, raging fiends when it came to a question of spilling human gore.

Such was Henry Plummer, half-gentleman, half-savage, who came from nowhere to dominate a kingdom of gold.

Some said he came from Connecticut. Others claimed he migrated from Wisconsin. Few, outside of Jack Cleveland, knew much about Plummer's early life.

One persistent report, circulating in the goldfields, was that Plummer, like the notorious Thompson brothers of Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, was English-born and of an excellent family.

Even his age was in doubt. Some said 27, others 37.

But, regardless of age or antecedents, Plummer came blazing. He reached the territorial goldfields in the early '60's Ten years earlier he left his crimson stain on California. There, he killed five men, broke up several homes, served as Town Marshal, ran for the Legislature, wound up in a State penitentiary, and finally fled to Walla Walla to escape the bullet death.

In the Idaho-Montana gold rush he was here, there, everywhere—Lewiston, Oro Fino, Florence, Bannack, Virginia City—and everywhere he roamed, there was bloodshed and death.

And now he was set for another killing.

PAT FORD was in the back room of his Oro Fino saloon when three men rode down the narrow, rutted "street," hitched their horses at the rack, and came clumping into the bar. The men were Charles Reeves, Bill Ridgely, and Henry Plummer. All were armed.

"Where's Ford?" Reeves bellowed. "He's been talking about us, the old son. Where is he?"

Ford swung into the bar from the back room. "Right here," he said grimly, "and I'm always ready to repeat what I've said about skunks like you." He was in his shirtsleeves. "I said you was a bunch of thieves and murderers and I see no reasons for takin' back what I said. Now get out."

But Pat Ford knew they had come to spill his blood. Now, to start something, Bill Ridgeley began torturing the little white dog. Ford's black eyes glittered. He turned toward the back room. At which Charley Reeves taunted:

"Run, you blasted son. Always knowed you would."

But Ford came back quickly. He had buckled on a pair of six-guns.

"Draw, damn you," he gritted. "There ain't room enough in the territory for all of us. The Vigilante's bound to get some of you but maybe I can decorate your hides before they harness you to a limb. Start it, you white-livered curs—start something."

Plummer reputed the fastest draw-

artist in the Rockies, edged toward the door. Ridgely crouched near the end of the bar.

Reeves threw down on Ford. But, quick as he was, Ford's Colt .44 roared first. He had been watching Ridgely, who was leveling on him. Ford's first bullet tore into Ridgely's right shoulder. Then Reeves shot Ford in the hip.

Plummer, half outside and making for the horses, called to Ridgely: "Crawl out of there."

But Pat Ford was walking in on them. He was oblivious of his wounds, determined to get these killers. He now shot Ridgely in the stomach and flung one slug toward Plummer. He was, for some reason, ignoring the somewhat boastful Reeves.

But Reeves, on the run with Plummer, was sinking slugs in Ford's big body. Ford emptied one Colt, reeled, flung it aside and blazed away with the other.

"Load that," he called, but no one dared. The room was smoke-laden, reeking with death. Ridgely crawled to his horse. Ford shot the horse. Plummer boosted Ridgely on his own horse. "Get going," he ordered, "we'll take care of Ford."

Ford, firing the last of the five bullets in his second gun, was in the act of reloading when Plummer and Reeves, squirming behind their horses, toppled him in the rutted road. He tried to get up, failed, then hurled the gun at them and mumbled:

"Come on and fight, you murderin' coyotes. I can kill you with my hands before I die."

But their work was done. They flung their last shots at his quivering body and then went clattering after the wounded Ridgely. Plummer rode double—behind Reeves.

As the assassins thudded out of Oro Fino, Pat Ford's friends gathered round him. He was trying to say something. He muttered:

"Git 'em, boys. Organize th' Vigilante like they done in California. It's—it's 3-7-77. Hang 'em higher'n heaven."

II

WHILE Plummer played 'possum, his sub-killers ran hog-wild in the rapidly growing goldfields. These thickly populated placers, which spread like mushrooms from Oro Fino and Florence to Bannack and Virginia City, embraced a mountainous region of more than 1,000 miles in the Rockies. They were infested by bandits supervised by Plummer and sub-headed by Charley Harper.

Twenty murders were chalked against Plummer's speckled band in less than three months. Florence, Elk City, Oro Fino and Deer Lodge were awed by the killers. The country itself was ideal for killing. It was pitted with dark canyons, blind gulches, sharp precipices and hazardous mountain passes.

Plummer, blandly denouncing the killer breed, piously objected when Vigilante vengeance was suggested. After he had gone free for slaying Pat Ford, he insisted:

"We ourselves must keep the law. This talk of a Vigilante is nothing but anarchy. And anarchy we can't have."

His alibi in the Ford killing was simple. He said Ford threw down on Ridgely and Reeves. So they killed him in self-defense. Not many believed this; yet few dared dispute it. So Plummer got off.

But Charley Harper, his lieutenant in the Florence district, wasn't so lucky. Three of his pet gun-slingers, Bill Peoples, Dave English and Nels Scott, killed a miner and stole $1,500.

Now the men of Florence took Pat Ford's dying advice. They banded together, got some double-barreled shotguns and went after the killers.

When they threw the three road-agents in jail Charley Harper laughed and sent for Plummer. They would rescue the trio.

But the little shotgun squad was ready for them. While a miners' court was busy convicting the three, the miners themselves shot one would-be rescuer, clubbed a dozen more out of town, and then proceeded with more vital work.

That night the miners got some good stout clothesline from the Boston Store, doubled this securely, noosed it around the necks of the murderers and then hoisted the killers into space where they dangled until dead.

Charley Harper, riding hard to save his own skin, headed for the wild country tapped by the Columbia River. But he promised Plummer he would come back. Plummer had a private killing for him.

"Jack Cleveland's talking too much," Plummer explained, his left eyelid twitching, "and we've got to get rid of him. I think I can leave this to you?"

"Sure can," said Harper, "for I owe him one for the dirty deal he gave me on that last split for the horses we stole from the reservation. Leave Jack Cleveland to me. I'll settle his hash when I get back to the shebang."

There were two of these shebangs, or hideouts. One was twenty-five miles from Lewiston on the road to Walla Walla. The other was at the base of Craig's Mountain, between Lewiston and Oro Fino. Here the plots were hatched for more than one hundred killings.

KILLINGS, now so numerous that they furnished the main topic in Lewiston, Oro Fino and elsewhere, got a fresh impetus when another saloonkeeper in Florence served notice on Plummer's lieutenants that he was going to spill their blood.

This was Jakey Williams, a quiet-spoken square-jawed arrival from Kentucky. Cherokee Bob and Bill Willoughby, two of Plummer's band had maimed a friend of the Kentuckian. They now notified Williams that he would "get his" unless he stopped talking.

But Williams did his talking with hot lead. He was just going into his saloon when the two killers closed in on him. They were stalking him from across the alley-like street.

Williams was wearing a six-gun but this had only five loads. Now he ran into his bar and yelled:

"Quick, Dave, hand me Old Betsy."

Old Betsy was a double-barreled shotgun crammed with buckshot. Whirling, Williams snarled:

"Now, you bushwhackin' murderers, start something if you feel lucky today."

Then, in one crashing, red moment, the carnage was on. Cherokee Bob, whose real name was Henry Talbert, dropped behind a packing-case in front of the hardware store of Britt Brothers. Willoughby ran to a little corral where the Florence blacksmith kept horses and mules.

Both killers opened up on Williams as he came stalking in with the shotgun. He held it close to his body, its twin hammers back, his steady fingers caressing the triggers. But he held his fire.

"Come out, you yaller dogs," he challenged, and kept walking toward the blacksmith's corral. "Show the whites of your eyes."

Cherokee Bob, leveling a dragon Colt across the packing case, let Williams have two slugs. One caught him in the shoulder and spun him around. The other tore into his hip. He limped a moment and Cherokee thought he was about to fall.

So the breed raised up to let him have another shot from the dragon. But Williams, snarling like a wounded panther, was far from dead. He swung the shotgun toward the packing case and squeezed a trigger.

Ar Old Betsy roared, Willoughby, firing from the corral, pumped two more .44s into Williams. Then, as Williams began to sag, Willoughby ran out and gripped his Colt in both hands. He was steadying the gun for what he hoped would be the final shot, when the shotgun belched again.

Willoughby, with a gaping hole in his throat, threw up his hands and lurched back toward the corral. Now Williams dropped the shotgun and reached for his Colt.

Tottering, he threw one bullet toward Cherokee Bob and then stalked after Willoughby. He shot him twice, ending his agony in the corral, and then tried to reel back across the street to Britt's. Here, Cherokee Bob, almost done in, crawled behind a corner of the building and reloaded.

As Williams turned the corner, blood in his eyes and the death rattle in his throat, both men fired their final shots. Williams fell dead in the street and Cherokee Bill collapsed across his bullet-riddled body. Thus passed two killers and one advocate of law and order. Spectators, huddling behind doorways, thought the duel lasted twenty minutes. But they were eighteen minutes off. Two minutes would have covered the entire action—and with time to spare. What made it seem long was the suspense. Williams didn't fire a shot until he felt sure his lead messengers would go where he intended they should go.

PLUMMER smiled crookedly when Bill Bunton told him that Cherokee Bob was blotted out. Under his breath, he muttered:

"I'm glad this Georgia breed is gone. He knew too much about California."

Plummer's California past was always rising to confound him. Cherokee Bob had known all about this. So it pleased Plummer when Jakey Williams shotgunned the breed out of the picture. Now, if Charley Harper could only silence Jack Cleveland. Then Bill Mayfield would be the only man left who knew his California record, with its killings and its penitentiary stripes. And something might happen to Bill Mayfield.

And something did happen to Mayfield. A gambler named Herb Evans blew out the crown of his skull with a sawed-off shotgun.

But now, after eleven months in the rich Lewiston district, Plummer began to grow restless. Word reached his alert ears that the territorial authorities might honor a requisition issued by the Governor of California.

Then it struck Plummer that he should change his name and migrate. He sent word to Charley Harper, "Don't forget Cleveland," and called in Charley Reeves and Bill Ridgely to ride with him to new pastures. They decided to go to Elk City and there reconnoiter. But they didn't linger long. Plummer was spotted by new arrivals from California.

Fear-ridden, he went to Deer Lodge. And here, to his disgust, he encountered Jack Cleveland. This dark menace sneered at him.

"Not running away, I hope?" was the first insult Cleveland fired at Plummer.

Plummer's glassy eyes were venomous. "Certainly not," he flared, "but this is a big territory; and I've got to know what's going on. Have you seen Charley Harper?"

"Harper's dead," said Cleveland, and looked closely at Plummer. "Deader than them five men you killed in California."

Plummer went ashen. "You—you mean you killed him?"

"Me? I should hope not. They put a rope round his neck. And that's what'll happen to you if you try to run out on me. Where are you headin' anyway, with all our money?"

Plummer denied he had money. But here he felt inspired to lie to Cleveland. He said:

"Jack, I'm leaving the territory. I'm going to ride overland to Fort Benton. Then I'll get a boat and go down the Missouri. There's nothing here for me. So I'm pulling out."

Jack Cleveland leered. "I'm leaving, too," he said significantly. "Plummer, you've swiped all the gold and now you're headin' for the States to spend it. Well, that's nice—but I'm ridin' with you to help spend it. Now, you get some good horses, cut loose from Reeves and Ridgely, and we'll head for Fort Benton. Just the two of us. And if you think you want to try any dirty work, you know what'll happen to that neck of yours. Remember Charley Harper, Bill Peoples, Dave English and Nels Scott."

Plummer had no choice. So they started their long ride toward Fort Benton.

III

ON that long, dramatic ride, through a wild and unchartered country, savage ridden and packed with menace, Plummer and his Nemesis slept little. Two-thirds of the time they were awake, wide-eyed, clutching the worn cedar handles of their six-guns and ready to sling lead on the slightest pretext. These men, en route to Fort Benton, were afraid. They were afraid of themselves. Each man was a killer and both were fugitives. Anything might happen before they reached the fort in the wilderness.

But Henry Plummer was not destined to "go back to the States," for on this memorable ride neither Plummer nor Jack Cleveland reached Fort Benton.

Instead, they stopped for food and shelter at Vail's ranch in Sun Valley. And here fate took a hand and introduced Electa.

Electa, or as she became known in Idaho and Montana, Eliza Bryan, caught Plummer's eye at once. He had more than a passing interest in every pretty woman he met. This girl, a sister of Mrs. Vail, attracted him. He decided he must have her. But desire, in this case, necessitated marriage.

But Jack Cleveland was smitten. He, too, decided he must have the fair Electa. They quarreled over her. Electa said she didn't know which man she preferred. At which her brother-in-law advised:

"Pass 'em both up. You'll be happier in the long run."

But Electa was susceptible. And Plummer was a fast worker. When news came that gold in unbelievable quantities had been found near Grasshopper Creek, Electa threw in with Plummer. With him she would go to Bannack, for better or worse. And Plummer, smiling coldly, said:

"Well, good-bye, Jack. I guess you'll be heading for Fort Benton?"

"Like the devil I will," snarled Cleveland. "If you're going to Bannack, married like a gentleman, I guess I'll just trail along to see that you behave like a gentleman. When you ride into the new goldfields I'll ride with you. Beat this hand if you can."

THUS Plummer and his Nemesis returned to the goldfields. They settled in Bannack. Here, and in Virginia City, Plummer ruled.

Just what promises Electa exacted from Plummer must forever remain secret. She has left no record of her brief life with Plummer.

Old-time residents of Bannack claim that Plummer kept his record clean during the first few months of his stay in this riotous mining camp.

Little was known here of his past. He was now 700 miles east of Lewiston across the mountains. He mixed with the best residents, indicated that he would like to join the Masons, and made a bid for a position as U. S. Deputy Marshal.

Was he trying to live down his past? Many thought so. Others disagreed. Among these was Jack Cleveland. When he was drunk Cleveland roared:

"Plummer a Mason—him a Deputy U. S. Marshal? Ho-ho! That's rich. Say, he's a horse-thief and a killer. I know all about Plummer. And if he keeps puttin' on airs, I'll tell it all over Bannack."

Plummer winced when he heard reports of this.

"Some day I'll kill that cur," he gritted. "But I'll wait till I find the right chance. It won't do to queer my chances in these rich diggings."

But if Plummer intended going straight he had little opportunity to carry out his design. One by one, and in pairs, his killers began herding into Bannack. Lewiston, Florence, Oro Fino and Elk City dumped the gunslingers into the new diggings.

"Well, here we are," grunted Bill Bunton, "ready to foller you, or . . ."

Plummer understood the significance of this unfinished sentence. The speckled band would not hesitate to betray him in case he turned against them. Now came Reeves, Ridgely, Clubfoot George Lane, Hayes Lyons, Cy Skinner, George Ives, Whiskey Bill Graves and others.

They bore down on Plummer. And it wasn't long before Bannack and the Grasshopper Diggings had "two men for breakfast," instead of one as had been the case in far-off Lewiston and Oro Fino. The killers were launched on another bloody carnival.

THEN Jack Cleveland got sick of Plummer's leadership. He announced that he was fed up.

"I hate that son's twitchin' eyebrows," he growled, "and it won't be long now before I cut him down."

His reference to Plummer's eyebrow touched a delicate spot. There was a white scar over Plummer's left eye. He got this wound in a fight with a bartender in Nevada City, California. The injury affected the eye-muscles and, at times, particularly when he was enraged, this eye jerked convulsively.

"I'll put both his glassy eyes out," Cleveland announced loudly, but Reeves and Ridgely tried to reason with him. Reeves said: "Plummer's chief and we might as well make up our minds about that. Who could handle the business better than Henry Plummer?"

"I could," Cleveland roared and started a still-hunt for Plummer. He stopped in every saloon in Bannack. And, since it was a cold day, he took a drink in each bar he visited.

When Cleveland reached the last saloon he was pretty well liquored. He found Plummer sitting near a stove in a bar operated by Jake Goodrich. With Plummer were Gus Moore and Jeff Perkins.

Cleveland banged open the door and came hurtling in with a blast of wind from the creek.

"Where is he?" he bellowed and began blinking as the warm air flooded his red-

shot eyes. "Come on, some of you, where's that skunk?"

Jeff Perkins got up. "Here I am, Jack," he said and added quickly: "I heard you was lookin' for me, but I ain't heeled."

Cleveland, making no effort to draw, squinted at him. He grunted: "Oh, so it's Jeff Perkins? Well, I'm after you, too. You owe me forty dollars. Now, gimme my money. I'm goin' to be chief, and I'm startin' right in by collecting. That's the way Plummer does."

PLUMMER turned slowly from the hot stove. And as he swung toward Cleveland he made a slight movement with his elbows. This shoved back the encumbering edges of his overcoat. Now he purred in his ice-cold voice:

"Jeff paid you that money, Jack. I saw him. I think you better go on home and keep quiet."

Cleveland whirled on Plummer. "You keep out of this," he warned, "or I'll take care of you, you blasted tin-horn thief."

Jeff Perkins slipped toward the door. Cleveland, watching him out of the tail of his eyes, bawled: "Run, you yaller-bellied coyote. And if you come back, come blazin'. Now, Plummer, it's you an' me. I ain't afraid of you or any man in your shebang. I'm goin' to be chief around here."

Plummer's slim body tensed, his eye twitched, and then his slender hand sped to his holster.

"Draw!" he snapped, and almost instantly there came a hoarse roar from his six-gun. "I'm tired of this," he grated, and threw another slug at Cleveland.

The heavy ball drilled Cleveland's stomach and knocked him down. Groveling, Cleveland pleaded: "Henry, don't shoot me while I'm down. Gimme a chance." He was groping for his Colt. A wild fear had come into his twisted features.

Plummer's icy eyes bored him. "No," he snarled, "get up."

Cleveland, half-paralyzed, tried to stagger erect but Plummer shot him in the head. The slug entered just under the left eye. Another bullet went wild but Cleveland, downed in a flash, was virtually finished; and Plummer knew it. There was an unholy light in his glassy eyes as he holstered his gun.

Now two of Plummer's gunmen, George Ives and Charley Reeves, covered the others. "You keep out of it," Ives barked; and then, to Plummer: "Come on, Henry, get out. He's finished."

Cleveland lay groaning, but no one dared carry him out. Finally Bannack's butcher, Hank Crawford, stooped over the stricken bandit and gave first aid. Then, assisted by Harry Phleger, Hank Crawford carried Cleveland to a bunk in his own cabin.

And, in this simple act of charity, Hank Crawford, a harmless citizen of the gold gulches, paved the way for one of the most bitter feuds ever waged by Plummer in his brief but bloody career.

And yet, oddly enough, the sequel to this feud led to Plummer's elevation to a place of honor and gave him unlimited opportunities for widening the scope of his killer breed. Plummer called this a grim joke on justice.

IV

PLUMMER sent a spy to Hank Crawford's cabin to keep an eye on Cleveland until the stricken confederate died. Cleveland lingered, in great agony, for four hours and then passed out doggedly refusing to squeal on Plummer.

But Plummer, believing that Cleveland had talked, began hating both Hank Crawford and Harry Phleger. He lost no time in picking quarrels with these men. Once, in a red moment, he accused Crawford, the butcher, of cheating him in a cattle deal.

"Get a gun and come out in the street," Plummer challenged, "and we'll settle this in about two minutes."

Hank Crawford grinned ruefully. He said: "I'm not as simple as that, Plummer; but I'll tell you what it is: you stop making threats and go on about your business. It'll be better for you."

Plummer's ghastly grin still hovered around his thin lips as he stalked into the little street in front of Crawford's meat market. Here he met Harry Phleger. Cold fury was in the killer's eyes as he snarled: "And as for you, Phleger, if I thought you had a gun, I'd kill you."

Phleger's blue eyes glinted. "I'm not a fighting man," he said evenly, "but when we meet again I'll be ready for you."

Phleger entered Crawford's market.

"You get a gun," he urged Crawford, "and be ready. I think Plummer means to kill us both."

But Crawford, unobtrusive and peaceable, used a gun only to kill stock. He objected: "I'll not use a gun on Plummer unless I have to do it in self-defense. It's so foolish." Crawford always had an idea that a man with sixguns belted around his waist invited trouble.

Oddly, however, the clash came when six-guns had nothing to do with the business. Plummer came for Crawford with a rifle.

But Crawford had no rifle. He was drinking a cup of coffee in a little eating-place near his shop when Frank Ray ran in.

"Here," said Ray and thrust something into Crawford's big hand, "take this and defend yourself. Plummer's coming down the street." Crawford glanced at the thing in his hands and paled. It was Buz Cavan's double-barreled rifle.

HANK CRAWFORD stepped outside the little log structure. He was smiling, an odd smile, half-determined, half-apologetic.

Now he saw Plummer. The killer was opposite, in the narrow, rutted street. Instantly the killer went for cover.

Plummer dodged behind one of the numerous covered wagons which rattled through the gulches at all hours. There was an unholy light in his fishy eyes. He placed one polished boot on the spoke of a wagon wheel. Then he cuddled the stock of his rifle against his shoulder.

But Crawford was strangely calm now. He rested Buz Cavan's gun on a log protruding from the cabin. Then he squinted along the barrel, took a long, even breath, and let Plummer have it. For the first time in his career Plummer, the deadly, had faced a man who could beat him to the shot. And this man a rank amateur.

Crawford's bullet struck Plummer in the right arm. He staggered back from the wagon, with his best gun-hand useless, and Crawford fired again. This slug missed. Plummer, making no effort to return the fire, yelled:

"Fire away. Shoot, you dirty coward."

Not many understood why Plummer said this. Harry Phleger, watching the duel, said:

"That's a blind. Plummer will go get his six-guns and claim he has a right to shoot Crawford on sight. Plummer isn't badly hurt."

But Crawford's bullet, which split the bones in Plummer's arm, laid the killer up for weeks. Doctor Glick, seeing signs of blood poison, wanted to amputate Plummer's arm.

Plummer's gang objected. "If you cut off Plummer's gun arm," said Bill Hunter, "I'll blow off your head. You take out the bullet and fix Henry so he can shoot."

So Doctor Glick labored for weeks to save the killer's arm. And he made a good job of it. But he never recovered the bullet.

WHEN Plummer came to trial for killing Jack Cleveland he was disgusted to find that Hank Crawford had been named as sheriff. Crawford served in this capacity during the trials of Plummer, Charley Reeves, Gad Moore and others. Reeves and Moore were tried for killing a white man, three Indians and a squaw.

Plummer, with his usual luck was acquitted. The others were banished from the gold gulches. This infuriated Plummer, as he needed these killers, and he ordered the death of every man who had a part in the miner's court proceedings. There were twenty-eight of these. One by one, these men were slain. Eight were cut down in cold blood. The others disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Plummer himself agreed to "get" Crawford.

But Crawford knew what was coming. He resigned as sheriff and started a lonely horseback dash for Fort Benton. This was 275 miles over a treacherous trail. He was followed by three of Plummer's killers, but escaped. He never came back to the gold gulches.

And now, with the office of sheriff vacant, Plummer launched a crafty move. He saw a chance to make himself and his killers more solid than ever. He wanted to be sheriff. And, strangely, he got what he wanted. There was an election, whether regular or not, and Plummer carried the day.

Yet his first official act was crooked. He named as his deputies to serve in the fast-growing Alder Gulch and Virginia

City district, some of the most notorious characters in the territory.

Chief among these characters were Jack Gallagher, Buck Stinson and Ned Ray. All had records.

But, consciously or unconsciously, Plummer named one honest deputy. This was Don Dillingham. Which paved the way for an immediate killing.

V

HENRY PLUMMER, Sheriff. . . . The killer was in his glory. He was the law. He had his own deputies. Who was there to dispute his reign?

Gold everywhere. Alder Gulch placers, the first year, produced $10,000,000. Ultimately there was more than $100,000,000. No wonder Henry Plummer smiled his oily smile.

In the rich Virginia City section there was a twelve-mile gulch, narrow and precipitous. Ten thousand humans sweating, cursing, shooting, living and dying in a makeshift "civilization" which sprang up like thistleweed in less than ninety days. Whiskey a dollar a drink. Wild men and wild women. Verily, a virgin field for a Plummer.

Plummer's "deputies" covered the straggling settlements—Junction, Pine Grove, Central, Summit, Highland, and that hell-roaring cauldron, Virginia City itself.

Vast distances, no law, lonely mountain passes. Seventy miles from Bannack to Virginia City; 280 miles from Bannack to Fort Benton and the river to the States; 475 miles from the gold gulches to the Mormon settlement at Salt Lake; and 700 miles, over forbidding mountains, from Bannack to Lewiston.

What chance did a poor miner have? Plummer himself ran some of the stage lines, owned many of the horses. Miners, trying to save their dust, drilled holes in wagon-tongues and hid the stuff there. But Plummer's bandits found it—and killed the miners for their cupidity. The moment a miner started, with gold, over the twisting trail from Virginia City to Bannack, he was a marked man. Plummer's deputies got word to Plummer's road agents. They even marked the stage with peculiar hieroglyphics. Then the road agents did the rest.

DON DILLINGHAM, the honest deputy, started his work under Plummer by warning three travelers. They were about to start for Virginia City with $3,500. On the trail they were to be robbed and murdered. The men who would do the job were Buck Stinson, Hayes Lyons and Charley Forbes.

The miners called off the trip. But Don Dillingham had to go to Virginia City on business. Here the killers stalked him. They were furious. In the narrow, crowded street where killings were a thing of daily occurrence, they closed in on the honest deputy. Jack Gallagher joined them.

"Don't shoot," someone yelled. This was Charley Forbes. He pretended that Dillingham was trying to kill him, seized Dillingham's gun and held on. Then the guns roared.

Dillingham fell without firing a shot. But there were four slugs in his quivering body.

This killing stirred the Alder Gulch prospectors. They grabbed Stinson, Lyons and Forbes and hustled them into a miner's court. They were convicted. Forbes managed to wriggle out of responsibility and his conviction was reversed. But Stinson and Lyons were ordered executed.

But here, again, a singular thing happened. Women were permitted, at this time, to witness hangings. With the killers about to be executed a number of women began weeping. It grew. Men half-drunk, joined the sob chorus.

Lyons was so young, too young to die. Then, suddenly, someone read a letter—a very pathetic letter—said to have been written by Lyons. It was to his mother. It was very touching. Bearded miners were bleating. The women kept wailing and entreating. The executioners felt themselves slipping.

And, with the two killers on the gallows, a confused vote was taken, despite the findings of the miners' court which convicted the murderers. And the prisoners were declared free. Now someone bellowed:

"Pore Lyons. Give him a hoss and let him go back to his ma."

So Lyons and Stinson, mounted on a pony belonging to a Bannack Indian, galloped away from the gibbet.

JUST who wrote that letter—a classic of its kind—was never established. Some of the miners asserted it was penned, in a maudlin moment, by a lawyer named Smith.

But others, nearer the mark, attributed it to Charley Forbes. He was a handsome devil with a good education. It was Forbes who, while serving as a Plummer freebooter, wrote inspired articles for newspapers and magazines. In these he pilloried the killers and indulged the hope that they would be captured and strung higher than Haman. This left-handed wish eventually came true. But Forbes didn't live to see the irony of this bit of frontier justice.

Charley Forbes, a laughing bandit, was later involved in an argument and killed by one of his own mob near Big Hole. Three .45 slugs tore out his heart and most of his chest.

And now, smiling in his cold way, Sheriff Henry Plummer was, as he fondly believed, on the highway to gold and glory. He bought fine raiment in Salt Lake, had his hundred-dollar boots made in San Francisco, sent to the Colt plant for a pair of silver-mounted, beautifully etched six-guns, and informed the wide-eyed Electa that she might return to Illinois to visit relatives. He told her:

"Some day I'll be a U. S. Marshal. I might even go to Congress. There is nothing in this world that Henry Plummer can't do."

But there was one thing Henry Plummer couldn't do. He couldn't continue trifling with the grim-jawed men of Bannack and Virginia City. These men included Nathaniel Langford, Jim Williams, John X. Beidler and a dozen others. Quiet men, tense, grim, with a deadly purpose in their hearts and that purpose was to get Plummer!

The Vigilante threat, predicted by Pat Ford, was looming. And now secret meetings were held in a little old cabin, dark and secluded, owned by Jim Williams. Here tight-lipped men came and went. They spoke in whispers and there were mysterious signals—3-7-77. Masked men stood guard with ugly looking Colt and sinister bowie-knife. Henry Plummer, the mysterious, was unknowingly headed for disaster.

VI

SEVERAL brutal killings precipitated the storm. George Ives, a ruthless murderer, butchered Nick Tiebalt. Then, on the lonely, 700-mile trail between Bannack and Lewiston, Plummer's old stamping-grounds, another atrocious crime was committed.

Three killers—Chris Lowry, Doc Howard and Jim Romaine—slaughtered five men and robbed them of $17,000. But the unfortunate man at the head of this marked group was Lloyd Magruder. Magruder, an Elk City merchant, had a warm friend in the person of Hill Beachy.

Hill Beachy, in a "dream," saw this murder. It came to him like a vision. He told his wife in their Lewiston home:

"Friend Magruder will never return alive. He has been killed at a lonely spot in the Bitter Root Mountains. Three men did it. They used an ax, a bowie-knife and a pair of Colt six-guns. I saw them split Magruder's head open with that ax. I saw the others die—the two Chalmers brothers, Charley Allen and Billy Phillips. Romaine killed Phillips with the knife. The others died by the gun. The murderers burned the bodies, then threw them over a canyon wall. It was snowing. The snow covered the blood. But it didn't cover the crime. I'll never rest till I get the killers."

Lewiston and Elk City men thought Hill Beachy, Magruder's friend, was loco. But he wasn't. He kept repeating his story. Yet none believed it.

Then, with grit and prescience rarely equaled in the grim annals of the West, Beachy set out to avenge his friend. The killers reached Lewiston, heard of Beachy's story, and fled toward Walla Walla.

Single-handed, and with only a bone-handled Colt, Beachy trailed the murderers from Walla Walla to Seattle. All along the Coast, for a distance of 2,000 miles, he was hot on their trail.

Sometimes he traveled in a buckboard. Again, on horseback. At times, he was afoot. Once or twice he was on coastwise steamers. But always they eluded him. Yet, he kept on, holding doggedly to the scent. He wrote Mrs. Magruder and his wife:

"I'll bring these killers back to face

their punishment, or die on the trail."

And he kept his word. He captured them in San Francisco, battled hard for requisitions and, tight-lipped and determined, took them back to Lewiston. Here the populace wanted to lynch them. But Beachy, grim as ever, roared:

"No, sir, men—you can't do it. They're my prisoners. I went after 'em—and I mean to see that they get a fair trial. I'll shoot the first man who touches them."

Beachy then induced an accomplice of the killers to confess. This confirmed in detail Beachy's "dream." And then Lewiston erected a scaffold for Messrs. Lowry, Howard and Romaine. Ten thousand spectators saw these disciples of Plummer die the halter-death.

Whereupon Beachy, whose man-hunt was a classic, went alone to the Bitter Root Mountains. Here he found the bones of Magruder and his companions. He took these to Lewiston.

Then, when he had seen them decently buried, Beachy recovered the $17,000 the killers had disposed of after murdering Magruder. This money, Beachy restored to Mrs. Magruder. Truly, a great soul, this Beachy. Lewiston should raise a monument to perpetuate his memory.

NOW the lightning of death began flashing all over the gold gulches. The vigilante began its merciless ride. Hooded mobsters had ruled the territory. Henceforth, quiet tight-lipped avengers would ride the treacherous trails.

The first culprit they got was George Ives. They tried him, proved that he killed Nick Tiebalt and others, and then asked him if he had anything to say. Big Jim Williams, the captain, was spokesman. He said briefly:

"Better tell it all, Ives. We have a list but it's not complete. Who are the others?"

Ives snarled: "Go to hell and find out. There's enough of 'em to send you sons to hell."

Here, Johnny Beidler, the hangman, cut in:

"That's enough, Ives. Hold still while I fit your necktie in place."

Ives died cursing Beidler and the Vigilante.

Two days later Jim Williams and his silent riders caught up with Red Yager. They gave him a rigid third degree and he finally confessed. He named, as Plummer's henchmen, the following:

Bill Bunton, George Brown, Sam Bunton, Cy Skinner, George Shears, Frank Parrish, Hayes Lyons, Bill Hunter, Ned Ray, George Ives, Steve Marshland, Dutch John Wagner, Alex Carter, Whiskey Bill Graves, Johnny Cooper, Buck Stinson, Mexican Frank, Bob Zachery, Boone Helm, Clubfoot George Lane, Bill Terwilliger and Gad Moore.

Their password, Yager added, was "Innocent." And some of the mob had peculiar designations. Some were roadsters. Others were "telegraph men." Still others were council-room keepers. They had significant markings for stage-coaches, even the ones operated by Plummer, and from these their associates in the various shebangs took their cues. Thus, the men on the road could tell exactly how much money was carried and who had it.

Each man wore a mustache and kept his beard trimmed in a certain way. This, so that they would not make the mistake of killing one another. Then, too, they had a song-code. Peculiar singing, or whistling along the trails, meant definite things to hidden riders.

And they wore their neckties fastened in a sailor-knot. Johnny Beidler, the hangman, thought this appropriate.

Dim stars were twinkling in Western skies, and a cold, biting wind was sweeping down from the Rockies as Red Yager and George Brown met the rope-death. The Vigilante harnessed them to a cottonwood tree. Yager's last words were:

"Boys, let me live to see Plummer get his. Then I'll die happy."

But the "boys" felt it just wasn't to be. So they left them there, in the whistling wind. On their limp forms were pinned these crude placards:

"Red Yager! Road Agent and Messenger!"

"Brown! Corresponding Secretary!"

Swiftly, others were looped to eternity —Dutch John Wagner, whining piteously; Joe Pizanthia, fighting savagely; and then five cut-throats, all in a row.

THE five were the half-savage Boone Helm; Jack Gallagher, who swore they'd never swing him; Hayes Lyons, who

had previously escaped by the sob route; Clubfoot George Lane, the shoemaker spy; and Frank Parrish, designated by the squealing Red Yager as a horse-thief and roadster.

All resisted arrest, but Jim Williams had a trained crew with hair-trigger guns. He drilled them in that little log hut in the canyon.

"We'll hang 'em if we can," he announced, "but we'll sink 'em with lead if we can't get 'em any other way."

The five were tried, convicted, then marched to a half-finished log structure. Here a convenient beam stuck out. Five ropes, brought by a negro, were tested. Then Beidler threw the ropes across the beam. The negro cinched the ends to logs at the base of the structure. Five packing cases, with cords attached, were placed under the ropes. At the exact moment, when Jim Williams nodded his head, Vigilantes would jerk the boxes from beneath the feet of the killers.

It was deathly still. Johnny Beidler adjusted the ropes. "All set," he announced in a flat voice. "Let 'er go."

With a strangled cry, Clubfoot George leaped to his death. He mumbled, "Innocent."

Boone Helm yelled: "There goes one to hell."

Then Jack Gallagher fell. Whereupon Helm bawled: "Kick away, old son. I'll be with you in hell in a minute."

Frank Parrish died without a word. But Hayes Lyons, whining to the end, begged: "Please see that my body is cut down and given to Cora." Cora was one of his sweethearts.

When his turn came, Boone Helm, a half-savage Kentuckian reputed to have eaten human flesh on the wild trails of the Rockies, howled:

"This is what I say: Every man for his principles. Hurrah fer Jeff Davis. Now, let 'er rip, you stranglers!"

After this, gunning and beating the gulches for miles around, the Vigilante rounded up and executed Steve Marshland, Bill Bunton, Alex Carter, Cy Skinner, Johnny Cooper, George Shears, Whiskey Bill Graves, Bob Zachery, Bill Hunter and others. Thus one by one, and in little herds, did the Plummer band meet the rope-death for killing 102 men at the behest of Henry Plummer, the master mind of the Rockies.

VII

HENRY PLUMMER, neat to the very last, was washing his face when death came to his cabin in the canyon. Grim-lipped Vigilantes stood there in the snow.

"Come in, gentlemen," invited the sheriff of the Gulches. "Cold tonight, isn't it? But 'twas a nice Sunday, yes? Now, what can I do for you?"

"Just this," said Jim Williams, "you can come with us, Plummer. The boys have a little matter to settle with you."

Plummer's glacial eyes swept toward a chair. But his voice was steady as he said: "Yes, certainly, if I'm needed. I'll just get my coat. Then I'll be right with you."

Johnny Beidler had seen that peculiar glint in the gray eyes. He leaped in front of Plummer, picked up the coat, and seized Plummer's twin Colts nestling beneath the coat.

"Here's the coat," said Beidler, "but I'll take charge of the guns. You won't need 'em. Not tonight." As he helped Plummer into his coat he said: "Two friends are waiting for you, Henry. Ned Ray and Buck Stinson."

Plummer's thin face went grayer as they marched him down the rutted road. He talked rapidly, nervously; but the others were strangely silent. A little shiver ran through Plummer.

Three hundred yards from the center of the town they came upon a crude gallows, fashioned from three pine trees, the work of Plummer himself.

Plummer turned to John X. Beidler. He said nervously: "X, I built that, you know. That was for Johnny Horan. He killed Ed Keeley. You remember, X?"

Beidler, commonly called "X," said nothing. He merely nodded and looked around anxiously.

Now came that negro boy, his eyes white, his skin looking grayish there in the snow. He was searching the crowd for Beidler. He chattered:

"Heah dey is, Mist' X. Heah's dem ropes you-all wanted."

Plummer's glassy eyes stared at the ropes, coiled like rattlesnakes, in the black,

trembling hands. Then Plummer's lips went white.

"Men, w-what's this?" he mumbled. "W-what do you want me here for?"

"For murder and worse," said Jim Williams. "Your time has come, Plummer, Now you're going. And Stinson and Ray are going with you."

Stinson and Ray began filling the night air with curses. But Plummer was wiser.

"Men, let's go somewhere and reason this thing out. I think I can show you where you are making a big mistake."

A Vigilante voice demanded: "How much chance did you give them you killed? They didn't have much time to reason things out. Plummer, you're guilty as hell. Now, we're going to hang you."

AND now a swift and demoralizing change swept over Henry Plummer. From brazen certitude he stooped to craven entreaties. He pleaded:

"Men, don't hang me. I'm too wicked to die. Spare me, for God's sake. For my wife's sake. She's away. My poor wife." Now he began whimpering: "Cut off my ears, cut out my tongue, strip me—and turn me out in the night to freeze. But don't hang me. For God's sake, men, I want to live, to see my sister-in-law, to settle up my business. Oh, men, men—"

And thus fell the tears of Henry Plummer, the strong man who was weak, the weak man who was strong. The man who had been marshal, was now sheriff, an aspirant for Congress, a petitioner for the high and responsible office of United States Marshal. Plummer, who might have gone far on the highroad to decency and honor.

He was humble now, humble and weak, gibbering like an idiot—and afraid of the beckoning beyond into which he had sent so many men who had been given little time to reason, and no chance to pray. Henry Plummer, the sickly killer who came from nowhere to blaze like a meteor, was crying.

But his tears were unheeded, and his dry sobs fell on deaf ears.

He looked up and saw hard, unpitying eyes—eyes like his own—eyes that held no pity; and on his shoulder there fell the weight of a heavy hand. Now a voice was saying gruffly:

"Come ahead, Plummer. Your hour has arrived." He knew now. Jim Williams and his grim executioners were not to be denied. The time had come when Plummer must pay. A voice seemingly from afar, said: "Step up there, now, and take it like a man."

But Plummer pulled back. He quavered: "G-give a man t-time to pray."

"All right," said the executioner, "but do it on the gallows where all can see you."

Plummer's face was almost as white as the snow beneath his neatly polished boots. Although the night was bitterly cold, he was perspiring, and that murderer's skull, usually protected by his hat-brim, was clammy. He tore off his necktie, like a man who is smothering: "I guess I won't need that. Give it to the boy who boards with me. Let him keep it to remember me by. . . . Well, men. . . . What's next?"

"Just this," said the hangman, as he adjusted the knot. "Now, Plummer, have you anything to say—a last word?"

The master-killer looked up at the glittering stars. Then he stared at the men down there in the snow. His chin quivered.

Did Plummer avail himself of this chance? Did he now speak feelingly of his mother; mention his relatives; warn young men to live right and thus avoid the gallows?

No. Not a word of all this. No sorrow, no regret, only self-pity. All Henry Plummer, the human iceberg, said was:

"Now, men, as a special favor, please give me a good strong drop."

And they did.

Thus ended the strange career of a man who waded through blood in his mad quest for gold. He died wearing the vigilante collar, 3-7-77, that creepy symbol of the West which means, "Death to all thieves and murderers."

He sleeps under a slowly sinking mound of rocks in lonely Boot Hill. But his victims, scattered all over Montana, are even lonelier than he. For there are no markers to indicate their last resting places in the tangled growth of the towering Rockies.

Vigilante vengeance ensnared other killers, including Joe Slade and Jim Daniels, some justly, and a few unjustly; but the head man of all was Henry Plummer. And there seems little room for doubt as to the merits of this particular hanging.

It was suicide! But Tip realized nothing but that this man was the midnight raider who had murdered his mother!

Tombstones for Tejanos

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

A Novelet of the Border

They weaned him on a straight feud diet, lulled him to sleep with the song of whispering lead. But even the Kid's rare gun-savvy was faded on that raw Tejano-range—it took the red badge of courage to buck the play of renegade guns!

SOME men are born fearless; others acquire the something that stamps them with the red badge of courage. But there's still another breed that men call brave. Nobody ever told them exactly what this fear stuff is; they never did like running anyway and spend their lives wondering how it feels to be scared. Of this latter type was lank Chill Finter, who drifted when the bad men drifted down to Texas.

Scenting trouble, as a black bear does honey, Chill prodded an ox team westward to Crooked Creek, on Rosillos range, and started to build up the Boxed F brand. Easy, you say, in those days following the water war. You're right. There were two things easy to corral in Texas of the drouth —mavericks and renegade lead. Chill receipted for both.

Chill brought his wife, Myrtie, with him and their small son, Tip. Myrtie, a hard-muscled, caustic-tongued mountain girl, had been weaned from the breast to a straight feud diet and her sleep had been lulled by the song of whispering lead. She never gave her man a moment's peace, yet he loved her with a fierce passion. As to peace, neither ever knew the meaning of the word after squatting on Crooked River.

Strong as a man, Myrtie helped Chill build the squat adobe that became their

home, their fort, their castle. She cared for little Tip, cooked the meals, fashioned clothes, rode wide circles looking for unbranded stuff and in divers other ways made herself old before her time. They were of the stamp, Chill and Myrtie, that with sheer guts drove back the minions of fear and made a wild empire safe for a thinner-skinned breed.

Tip was thirteen when Chill gave him his first gun—a .44 Navy Colt's taken in a range ruckus with a wide looper whose gun slickness didn't match his ambitions. Myrtie raised hell a-plenty about the gift, claiming that the boy was little more than a baby who would salivate himself, not to mention dogs and cows and broncs. Chill listened silently to her tirade, listened with a grin, his only way of combatting her nagging. And as he smiled, he whittled at a bull hide holster for the boy. He had his way, as always, and with the utmost care and patience, set about teaching Tip what he knew about gun-slinging, which was plenty.

IN a year the boy had grown and progressed marvelously under his father's tutelage. Chill's wide mouth used to twist proudly as he watched the youngster whip out the big gun with a smooth motion and thumb six straight shots into an upright board shaped like a man, at thirty-three paces. So Tip was ready, though untried, at the time of that last fatal raid of the Carillo gang from across the muddy tide of the Rio.

Queer how the play went that mad day. Tip was undeniably frightened as a horde of cone-hatted devils came swooping down out of the south, as Myrtie and Chill knelt at the recessed windows and gave back hate-driven lead at their attackers. It was no chance foray of Spic raiders, this. For several years, tejano guns had given them little chance to make their customary raid into Old Mexico. Thus the Chisos trail was open to wholesale rustling of Chihuahua longhorns that were swum across the Rio Bravo Del Norte and sold to buyers who were not too particular what they drove to northern markets.

As Juan Carrillo, below-the-border renegade leader, grew in strength, so had his determination grown to dislodge Chill Finter from his strategic position athwart the old Comanche trail near the shallow crossing of the Rio. It was an ideal route for Mr. Carrillo's business and he had found the old southerner tough, salty and hard to dislodge. Numbers of times he had sent infallible killers to rub out the gringo. Not only had they failed but, to a man, no one of them had ever returned.

Another and more personal reason inspired Carrillo to end Chill Finter's career, a reason involving Myrtie and the necessity of removing Chill without harming his tiger woman. Certain at last of the futility of trying to bushwhack Finter, the renegade leader threw his whole force against the stronghold in desperate attempt to gain his end.

Heart pumping, breath coming jerkily, Tip crouched at the center of the long room, harkening to the jar of heavy weapons, to the dull *whup* of lead into adobe. Powder fumes stung his nostrils, drew tears to his eyes. Through gun haze he watched his parents load, aim and fire, cool as if planting corn in their own bottomland, conserving the precious ammunition against the close conflict that must surely come.

Tip seemed chained by some inner conflict that held him powerless until he saw Myrtie stagger back from her loop, clap hand to her forehead, groan and slump limply to the hewn floor. Whimpering softly, Tip crept to her side, shuddered at what he saw. A tiny purplish hole marred the bronze of her forehead and from it a thin trickle of crimson welled and eased down her cheek. Instinctively the boy knew she was dead and his anguished cry drew Chill's attention.

Tip scarcely heard those hoarse curses as his sire darted to the side of his stricken wife, as he called piteously for her to speak. He well knew his hard-voiced mother would never speak again and like a killer wolf he sprang to a loop to take his vengeance. In the awful moment he had gazed at the wound that had taken her who had borne, guided and loved him, Tip had cast aside the cloak of childhood, had become a man in fact. And in his heart was planted a mad desire to kill.

He never remembered reaching the loop, of thrusting his pistol through. His first impression of conflict was a leering face before him, the recoil of his weapon as he eared back the hammer and hurled a .44 slug, his paean of joy as the creeping rene-

gade, torch in hand, stiffened, spun and crashed.

Like a mad dream, that fight. Thundering horses with low-hung riders circling Injun-like and firing as they ringed the house . . . lead streaking from the loopholes . . . streamers of fire from Tip's .44 . . . banners of smoke from Chill's .50 Sharps . . . hoarse shouts from the savage attackers. Through it all, Tip and his sire toiled at their triggers, sweat and grime fouling their eyes. Nor were they firing in vain.

As three cone-hatted riders rocketed by, close bunched, Tip unhooked three shots. He tallied one man center, dropping him like a plummet from the saddle; wounded another so badly that he screamed to God for mercy as he reined out of the fight. They drew off after that, for Chill, from his vantage, had nailed three others with his matchless marksmanship.

The respite was not for long. The raiders dismounted, surrounded the cabin and, at a word from their leader, dodged forward with howls of hate. There were four sides to the house and but two defenders and that's why this purely Anglo-Saxon strategy succeeded. Though Chill dropped a swart pair and Tip upended another, the renegades reached the building, threw themselves prone, inside the field of vision afforded by the loops. Chill might have got them under his sights by opening the heavy hewn shutters, but that was unthinkable. So he awaited their next move, and waiting became aware of smoke wisps curling from beneath the heavy log door.

II

FATHER and son faced each other at that, wiped sweat from their faces, considered. The door would surely burn down in spite of anything they could do. Then would come the test, with the answer almost a foregone conclusion. Chill was suddenly afraid, for the first time in his life, afraid for Tip. He grimaced, cuddled the few shells remaining to him in the palm of his huge hand.

"How many catridges yuh got, Tip son?" he queried softly.

Tip blinked. "Three, cowboy," he said stoutly. "An' each un's got a skunk's name writ on it!" His small face was grim.

"Me, I've got four," grinned his sire. "We kin count on rubbin' out seven, at most. Hit ain't 'nough. Still, we mought hol' 'em off till dark an' git our chancet. Gimme yore cat'ridges, son, an' when she gits hot you shin daown inter thet dry cistern under yon cupboard. They won't find find yuh thar. If I'm kilt, go tuh Pat Blaine at the P Bar B. He'll make a place fer yuh. Allers hol' up yore haid, Tip; be a man an' never fergit it was Carrillo an' his Spics as drilled yore maw. Promise yuh'll git that jasper if yuh live!"

Tip's lip quivered as he unloaded his beloved .44, passed the three shells to Chill. His voice, however, was firm as he gave his word.

"I'll git the kioat, Paw, iffen I have tuh trail 'im tuh hell an' back!"

Chill smiled, choked in the acrid smoke that was fast filling the room. Carefully, silently, he slipped a pair of the thick cottonwood shutters, one on either side of the room that a current of air might circulate. Then he and Tip hugged the floor and waited, while flames slowly licked at the door panel.

TIME dragged. Flies buzzed. The room heated unbearably and filled with dense smoke that drew repeated coughs from the forted pair. A rattle of hoofs drew Chill to a loop. A rider, hidden behind his mount, whirled from the brush dragging a denuded pole at the end of his rawhide lariat. Chill dropped the animal, knocked down one of the peak hatted gun gang as they swarmed out to retrieve the ram. Then they were battering at the weakened door, hidden from the defenders by a pall of smoke.

"Wham! Wham! Wham!"

With measured stroke they attacked the door which shuddered at each impact. At the fourth stroke it left its home-made hinges and crashed into the room. Then they were massed in the portal, stumbling over the dead laid there by Chill's deadly fire. As the beleaguered father pressed trigger on his last cartridge, he mumbled to Tip to, ". . . high-tail tuh cover, young-un', an' lie doggo!" And Tip did, pausing behind the partly opened cupboard door to watch the last heroic stand of his sire.

Bellowing curses, Chill clubbed his buf-

falo gun, swept forward to meet their rush. It was an awful bludgeon in the hand of a giant who only half-guessed at his own strength. Like terriers, not wanting in courage, they swarmed to the attack. Some got through the deadly circle swept by that hurtling stock; others fell in that smoke-wreathed doorway without having seen the deadly mace that struck them down.

Like the glorious legion that perished within the blood bathed walls of the Alamo, Chill was forced to bow to hopeless odds. Smashed backward by their lead; stabbed and slashed by their double-edged knives; weakened by his own efforts and loss of blood, Chill sank at last to be pounced upon and clamped to the floor. His eyes were glassy as the bulky figure of Juan Carrillo entered the room, a slender Mex cigaret a-droop from his curling lips.

As the renegade's gloating eyes fell upon the stiffening form of Myrtie Finter, his composure fled and, for the moment, he was a man abashed. His cigaret dropped to the floor and he stooped slightly as if he would have gone to her side. Thinking better of it, he whirled upon Chill and devils flamed in his eyes. His speech was totally alien to one of Latin blood:

"Same ol' fightin' boar-hawg f'um Cantankerous Branch, ain't yuh Chill?" he gritted. "Tolt yuh oncet, Chill, I'd fotch yuh hell a-plenty, come my day. Tolt yuh I'd have last laugh on yuh. Mind thet? Wal, I'm a-laughin' naow an' I'll laugh when they pull-straitch yore neck-j'ints 'til the marrer bang-cracks in 'em."

Chill Finter shook his towsy head as if to rid himself of a troublesome nightmare. His tormentor, knowing half he said was lost upon the battered victim of his desire, turned to look at Myrtie again.

"Right sorry 'baout Myrtie," he said earnestly. "Aimed tuh make her fergit the Finters. Reckon hit's the price-debt I pay. Feller cain't have ever'-thin', kin he? I did'n' mule it inter this wilderness fer nawthin', Chill, an' yore caows is jest a small part uh that somethin' I'm after. South-yonderly is hull passels uh Mex caows jest a hankerin' tuh be druv across the line fer Yank greenbacks. That's the idee, Chill. Savvy?"

Chill Finter's head was commencing to clear as abundant life surged back into his body of rawhide and steel. His gray eyes smoldered as he shook off a pair of rat-sized renegades and sat up.

"I mought uh knowed," he muttered bitterly, "thet Juan Carrillo an' Wann Creel was one an' the same. Nary Spic hide so tough it could hol' candle tuh yore o'neriness, ner neither no Creel hide so stout a Finter cain't make out tuh bark hit. Yore pap kilt my pap, Wann, an' then I kilt yore pap. Figgered I'd kilt yuh thet time me'n you shot hit out in Fieryhill Woods but yuh musta cheated the Devil mos' powerful. I didn't see yuh in the fight tuhday or I'd uh lead-fotched yuh, which the same me or my kin'll live tuh do final."

CARRILLO, southern feudist, laughed then sobered as sudden thought struck him. "Where's thet whelp uh your'n an' Myrtie's?" he queried.

Chill lied. "He's with Pat Blaine, a man too big fer you an' yore Spic devils tuh make ary truck with. He'll git yuh, Wann Creel, iffen I don't!"

The renegade laughed easily. "You won't, Chill. Thet's shore!"

In terse commands, he ordered a search for the whelp of the wolf. Chill held his breath as they probed in the gloom behind the cupboard door, a gloom littered with odds and ends of kitchenware. They missed the covered opening, just as Chill had predicted and thus missed wiping out the Finter clan. And as they laid heavy hands upon him and gave over the search, Chill breathed a sigh of relief that a kinsman was left to avenge him.

Tip had not dropped into the cistern until after he had heard the conversation between his sire and Carrillo, until he had had a good look at the renegade leader, until there had been indelibly burned upon his brain, an image that would last to his dying day. Even from his earth-hemmed covert, the boy heard them lead Chill away, heard the mocking tones of Carrillo promising something about, ". . . an' I won't pull-straitch yore neck this time, Chill. These Mex has ways uh plague-killin' on the ant hills that's a pos'tive pleasure tuh watch. I'm lettin' 'em have yore wuthless carcass tuh pay fer their *compadres* yuh done beefed."

Night fell shortly, and Tip crept from his hiding place. The quietness of death hung heavily over the only home he had

ever known. He touched the cheek of his mother, found it cold, shuddered. Then he was running, the screech of a night bird stinging his ears, running toward the P Bar B ranch and genial Pat Blaine. How he reached there he never knew. He never remembered crossing those miles of tortured buffalo wallow and intervening hill chains on that blackest of nights. But arrive he did, and the tale he told sent a score of hard-bitten punchers racing on a punitive mission to the Boxed F.

They reached there in the dawn, took summary vengeance upon a half dozen Spic riders who were industriously rounding up the Finter cattle. But of one resembling Juan Carrillo they found nothing nor was trace ever found of Chill Finter who was thus added to the already heavy toll taken in the deadly Creel-Finter feud of southern Appalachia.

III

SUSTAINED horror is foreign to the normal, healthy boy of fourteen. So, after the first shock of his tragedy had worn away, Tip gave himself over wholeheartedly to the business of becoming a cow hand. Pat Blaine had smiled, pulled at his longhorn mustaches when the boy hit him up for a job punching cows. He didn't say much, those old timers were not a garrulous lot, but next time he hit town, he brought back chaps, hat, spurs, saddle, rope, in short a full and complete cowboy rig, boy size. Yes, and gave them to a wide-eyed and very much flabbergasted boy.

Then with Concho Storrs, round-up boss assisting, they picked out five short legged ponies for Tip's personal string. The youngster swelled with pride and joy of his new outfit and was duly thankful when the "old man" assigned Black Bob, an itinerant "hawss an' rope" man, to drive hoodlum wagon and act as cook's flunky during beef gather.

Tip's job wasn't much. He nursed the cavvy in daylight hours and kept the camp supplied with firewood dragged in from the nearest *bosque*. Most important, he did his tasks enthusiastically and well and made good in the eyes of big Concho Storrs. Before round-up was over, Concho promoted him to night wrangler and he was well on his way to becoming a puncher of cows.

Between round-ups, he did a little of everything along with the rest of the boys. And Concho and the "old man" had many a laugh at the enthusiasm the boy showed at his work. Nor was the big .44 carried by the boy in its home-made holster, the least amusing thing about the boy in their eyes. From the first, Tip had insisted upon wearing the arm. When Pat had demurred, Tip sobered like a judge, reminded him of the fate of the Boxed F and offered to quit. That fetched the old man, though the hands hoorawed the boy plenty about his "hawglaig."

"Hey, Pistol," called out Buzz Bernal one morning as the riders trooped out to cut out mounts. "Whar yuh goin' with the Kid?"

That brought a laugh and they christened him Pistol Kid, a name that stuck until he joined the ranger service as a tracker, years later. Tip was first of all master of himself, seemed never to lose his temper. The way he absorbed their good natured raillery endeared him to every man on the P Bar B.

"Funniest sight ever I see," grinned Concho Storrs one day. "I set Buck an' Pistol tuh diggin' post holes fer the new c'ral yonder. By actual count, Pistol dug fo'teen holes an' Buck showed him how tuh dig ever' last one of 'em! It took 'em fo' hours, Buck sweat like a grass-bellied cayuse an' Pistol never turned a hair."

"Say!" cut in Rod Sellers, grizzled wagon boss. "Was I tellin' yuh 'bout Pistol tyin' ontuh thet mosshorn Roany thet holes up in the breaks of the Eagletails? I tolt the yonker never tuh twine a big un with thet short string uh his'n, but he does it, regardless. Roany yanks thet leetle pinto offen his feet, snaps the cinch an' drags Pistol nigh forty rod 'fore I kin git my grass over that renegade's horns. Danged if the leetle catamount don't come up a-heavin' like a packjack. Quick as a flash, he taken a couple dallies round a stump an' hollered fer me tuh cast the critter loose . . . an' him all skinned up an' fulla briers. Guts, him, an' he don't know when he's licked."

"Guts . . . yeah," mused Pat Blaine. "The boy whips a .44 like a ranahan. I seen him drill a breeze-burnin' jack-rabbit

on the dead lope, t'other day. Take a look in the saddle shop. Danged if the Kid hasn't half covered the walls with kioat pelts. Best look tuh yore saddle, Concho. I'm makin' a foreman outa that whelp."

SO it went. Tip was the life of the ranch, the subject of never ending comment, amusement and mild hoorawing. Yet when the day's chores were done and rangemen slumbered heavily in the bunkhouse, no one of them dreamed that a wide-eyed boy tossed restlessly, hearkening to their snores and conjuring up smoke-wreathed pictures of the adobe at the Boxed F, of his grim parents, of a tall, bandaleroed figure with scarred face of consummate cruelty. And ever before he dropped to dreamless sleep, Tip prayed to a God his mother had told him about, prayed it might be given him to keep the sacred promise he had made to Chill Finter.

With first breath of spring, Concho set Tip to tailing up boogered-down cows along the flooded bottoms adjoining the Rio. It was a mean, thankless job, but Tip stuck it out, taking the bad with the good for sake of climbing the ladder. He graduated at length to a squad of riders who combed the breaks and brush-hemmed bottoms for the wilder cows and their fleet offspring.

By now, Tip could ride as if molded to the saddle. His natural fearlessness and love of the game made him invaluable along the hill borders and the rougher breaks of the wide range. As Concho expressed it, ". . . Pistol's got cattle savvy, him, an' fer all 'round cowpunchin' he kin spot the common drifter cards an' spades an' beat 'im forty ways from the jack."

CALF branding dragged out until Concho swore, ". . . twixt the late rains, a heavy doggy gather, lazy punchers an' o'nery reps, we'll likely be brandin' come next fo'th uh July." The punchers were getting ringy, eager for a break in the deadly monotony, a swift ride into town and a swifter dissipation of accumulated earnings in honkatonks and gaming dives. Pistol had no such inhibitions. To him it was a game, entrancing, alluring. . . .

Long days in the saddle with cold rain dripping cheerlessly onto yellow slickers . . . miserable nights of wetness and bone-chilling cold . . . frost-stiff tarps agitated at cookie's call . . . cursing riders turning out . . . cold boots . . . aching muscles . . . steamy comfort of bacon, bannock and great draughts of coffee, hot and bitter and black . . . the quick fight with cold and mean-eyed broncs . . . the big branding corral in the oval of Half-moon Mesa headland . . . bawling cattle in a fog of sky-beating dust . . . plaintive crying of branded calves . . . bellowing of irate bovine mothers . . . darting horsemen swinging their loops and yipping hoarsely as they worked . . . grime-blackened, sweat-streaked punchers dragging in wild-eyed doggies, marking their ears with crops, swallowforks, underbits before turning them over to the branding men . . . Black Bob, ebon torso bared, tirelessly wielding the rosy marking irons . . . stench of singed hair and hide stinging the nostrils. . . .

It was a picture of hard, healthy work that tested a man's mettle and Pistol reveled in every minute of it.

"A Boxed F!" he shrilled proudly, dragging up a struggling calf, offspring of the tiny herd Pat Blaine was building into a heritage for the boy. "Crop the right ear; swallowfork the left; burn the right shoulder!"

"Gotcha, Pistol!" A ready hand leaped to mutilate the ears as Black Bob withdrew the proper iron, leaped astride the frightened beast and pressed the cherry-red iron home. A thin, acrid smoke coiled upward to mingle with the swirling alkali murk as the tortured creature bawled its agony.

"Tally yore Boxed F!" shouted the boy as they cast off his rope.

"Boxed F!" droned the tally man as the calf was released and shunted back to its crazed mother, as two riders whirled in with another pair of victims.

"Circle Slash!" . . . "Star 22!" . . . "Hitchin' Bar!" . . . "Rafter Z Cross!" came succeeding calls from the ropers as the branding men sorted their glowing irons.

"Circle Slash!" . . . "Star 22!" . . . "Hitchin' Bar!" . . . "Rafter Z Cross!" repeated the dry chant of the tally man.

So it went until the annual increase was marked and tallied, until each outfit knew to a cent what the year's profits would be

if it were permitted them to disregard such futures as fever, lobo wolves, panthers, rustlers, freshets or a fluctuating market.

IV

TIP grew like a weed during the summer, grew until the boys looked askance at his bulk as they called him Pistol. As Black Bob aptly put it, ". . . hit 'pears lak ouah Pistol done growed inter a long-tom buffalo gun, sho 'nuff!"

With the start of the beef gather in the fall, Concho put Tip to riding wide circle and rimrocking. For three weeks he held to this most punishing of range tasks, up before dawn to an early breakfast, pounding the far corners of the range for the big wild steers, then the long ride campward too weary to care where the drowsing bronco carried him.

When the herd was bunched in the Big Animas, Tip worked herd like an old hand. It was freely admitted that he had arrived at a puncher's estate. It was a strange year. Big drovers who had customarily bought up whole herds for the long trek northward, were conspicuous by their absence. John Slaughter had hazed his entire outfit into the Sulphur Springs Valley of Arizona, a new cattle empire. Saul Lowery had taken a killer's ball in his heart and was buried in Dodge's boothill. Dunk Cleborne had been gored by an angered cow after tailing her out of the mire, and they said he would never hairpin another horse or ride point on another of the great herds he had driven into Kansas. Cussin' Cap Cully, hardrock of Valverde, had quit the game, vowing the grangers had, ". . . plumb onjointed the ol' Chisholm Trail, what with their danged bobwire fences an' their wuss'n Injun thievin'."

The P Bar B beef crop was a large one and, try as he might Pat Blaine failed to find a buyer for it. From the north came flattering reports of a strong market with swarms of eastern buyers at railend. That's how come the Crooked Creek Pool was formed and Concho Storrs chosen to take the trail with four thousand lean-hipped longhorn steers. One of the first waddies he named to accompany him was Tip Finter—the Pistol Kid.

Everywhere the winding herds were on the move. Range riders were no longer a drug upon the market; their services were in urgent demand with none obtainable. Because few of the Pool ranchers cared to worry along short-handed (a fatal practice on the Mex border in the late seventies) Concho started north sadly undermanned, hoping to pick up riders en route.

Besides the Pistol Kid, there were Sowbelly Sims, hash wrangler, and Black Bob, Coley Cooke, Manny Mays, Jace Jennings and Ab Mayhorn, all proven hands from Pool outfits. In addition there were ten Mex *vaqueros* who had ridden across the line to hit Concho up for riding jobs. Because two of the *paisanos* declared they had driven to Kansas with Cap Cully, Concho signed them on, much as he detested Mex help. And Tip, well he was plumb disgusted when informed that the Spics were trailing along, for he had seen a mother die and a father beaten down under the guns of such as they.

DANGER trail! The far-stretching herd, crawling, bawling. Days of dust, of intolerable heat, of hunger and searing thirst. Nights of torment, sleeping with one ear cocked to the tone of the critters, with one eye focused upon the courses of flaming storms chasing far horizons. Nights shivery with threat of winter and worse, the menace of scattered bands of predatory Commanches or renegade whites led by the stripling notcher, Billy the Kid, and others of his ilk.

They had a real wood fire, instead of cowchips, the night the tall stranger rode into camp. The herd had swum the Prairie Fork of Wild Horse Creek, had slaked their thirst, cropped their fill of the lush buffalo grass and were resting, chewing their cuds. Supper was over. From the chuck wagon came the friendly clatter of pans and pots. Black Bob picked at a battered banjo, trying vainly to throw his rope over chords that would match the querulous voice of woman-hating Sowbelly Sims. . . .

While yuh live single, boys, yore jest in yore pri-i-i-ime,
Yuh got no wife tuh sco-o-o-old yuh, nawthin' on yore mi-i-i-ind!
But when yuh gits married, boys, yo're done with this li-i-i-ife,
Fer yuh've sold yore swe-e-e-et comfort tuh gain yuh a wi-i-i-i-fe.

"Hey, Sowbelly!" called out laughing Ab Mayhorn. "How come you figgers it so tough havin' a wife ride herd on a feller? Me, I ain't never seen no married jaspers actin' like they had a ring in their nose."

"Humph!" Sowbelly ejected a cheekful of fine-cut juice, planted a pair of dripping arms and surveyed the ring of hoorawing punchers. "Glad they's somethin' one uh you fellers admits tuh not knowin'. Time yo're my age yuh'll know hell of a lot less'n yuh know now. Wimmen is 'lasses sweetnin' till they gits a brand throwed on a feller's brisket; then they's plumb p'izen. Once they gits a man down an' cinches a kak on his carcass they quirts an' spurs till he's sore as a saddle gall. Yeah, an' what's more, they keep 'im that-a-way."

Black Bob chortled with glee, struck a chord and Sowbelly took up his interrupted ditty.

> Fill up yore bottles, boys,
> Drink yore Bourbon down,
> Drink luck tuh all single men
> Wherever they are found.
> Luck tuh the single, boys,
> Wish 'em all success,
> Luck tuh the married ones,
> How kin we wish 'em less. . . .

"Marse Sowbelly am sh' tellin' de troof," sighed the black man as he ran his thick fingers over the strings. "Ah done tied up wif a high-yella gal f'um Loozianneh oncet. Dat woman jes' nachelly druv me f'um bad tuh wuss. . . ."

"Drove yuh to caow punchin', eh, Bob?" taunted Jace Jennings.

Their laughter was cut short as a horse splashed out of the silent-running prairie stream and its rider yipped to "raise the camp." The approach of the stranger to the fire light brought a hush, like the sudden cessation of frog clamor, a hush broken only by the distant voice of the Pistol Kid as he circled and sang to the bedded doggies. . . .

> I've roamed the Texas prairies,
> I've rid the cattle trails. . . .

A dripping buckskin paused at the edge of the light circle as the stranger looked them over.

"Evenin', gents!" he saluted, throwing his weight to his left stirrup.

"Howdy!" called back Concho Storrs, stirring the blaze. "Light an' set!"

The man dismounted, came forward with bell rowels a-jingle. At each step he cut jauntily at worn leather chaps with a loaded quirt that hung from his wrist. His wide, smoke-smudged sombrero shaded a pair of dark eyes and a knife-scarred nose. Two guns, worn well up with butts forward, branded him of the cross-draw breed, legendary gunmen seldom seen. His puma-like looseness of stride, made Concho instinctively glance out into the gloom from which he had come. To the trail boss the stranger was immediately suggestive of menace, of stalking death, of things that creep in the night and slay.

The rest of the boys must have felt the same way for they held grimly silent at his approach. The man cocked his head to listen, then grinned derisively as Tip's thin voice came drifting across the bedded herd.

> Oh I kin tip a lasso, an' with the greatest ease
> Rope a streak uh lightnin' an' ride 'er whar I please. . . .

Laughing softly, sarcastically, the man squatted at fireside, drew a blazing twig from the fire, touched it to a brown paper cigaret, threw it back again.

"That herd, Mister," he drawled amusedly, jerking his hand aimlessly. "Must shore be mighty laig-weary tuh stand fer that kioat a-bellerin' in their ears, that-a-way. Me, I'd shore stompede, plumb."

CONCHO kept his eyes down. He decided he didn't like the stranger and didn't care to show him the hostility that burned in his eyes.

"Hell," he said stiffly. "That ain't no kioat. A wolf hollers that-a-way, too, feller, an' that un yuh jest heard is salty. Might yuh be a-ridin' through, stranger?"

"I mought if I don't decide tuh he'p yuh trail yore critters no'th. Heard you was short handed."

He said it as if his connection with the pool was a matter of his own pleasure and that galled the trail boss.

"Am!" snapped Concho. "But short hands is a sight better'n pore hands."

The stranger bridled. "Name uh Ammons—Tom Ammons," he informed them.

"Not thet names counts fer nawthin' on these trails. Jest a driftin' cow hand outa Lincoln County, New Mex, that's me, gents. They'll tell yuh on the Pecos I'm a top hand. . . ."

"At what?" snapped Concho. "Ridin' six-gun?"

Tom Ammons shrugged. "Trail drivers has been needin' good gun slammers before now," he pointed out. "Heaps uh bad hombres, killers, fanners, notchers, workin' outa Lincoln right now. They're right cow hungry, too. I don't 'low hit'll break yore outfit tuh pay me wages; I might save yuh if it come to a tight. Course, iffen yuh jest nacherally don't want he'p. . . ."

"Uhhuh." Concho pondered. He knew Ammons spoke the truth. No law beyond the Pecos had become a byword from the Rio Grande to the Milk River in the far northern range. In cattle land, news had a way of traveling swiftly and without visible means of transmission. Word of an undermanned herd on the trail would attract human raptores as carrion entices vultures. Disliking the scar-faced stranger, suspicious of what motive lay behind his coming, the trail boss decided to take a chance.

"I'm payin' fifty, Ammons," he said simply. "If that suits, yo're hired, startin' mañana."

Ammons grinned. "Yuh won't be sorry, Storrs," he smirked. "I'll give yuh all yuh expect of a man an' mebbe a leetle more. What's chances uh gettin' a spare sougan?"

A screaming warning flashed through the brain of the trail boss. By all rights the man Ammons should not have know him from Adam's off ox. Yet he had brazenly called a stranger by name and promised him more than he was paying for. There was a lot more to this whole business than just a cowboy seeking work. Something told Concho right there that the *cumshaw* might be measured in blood and mortal conflict.

"Dig this man up some kind of a bed, Sowbelly," ordered Concho. He turned, strode bedward to catch such sleep as he might before Pistol, Coley Cooke, Manny Mays and the five Mex herders had to be relieved at midnight. But he kept his guns within easy reach.

V

THE stars were bright, the air crisp, when Sowbelly roused Concho, Jace Jennings, Black Bob, Ab Mayhorn and the five Mexicans, poured them steaming coffee as the jingler led up their mounts. Silently the shift was made; silently save for Concho's muttered warning to the Pistol Kid as they passed in the night, ". . . new hand, Pistol. Name uh Tom Ammons. Watch him keerful. Shore looks like snake blood tuh me!"

So Tip was curious and constrained as he loped to camp, turned his mount into the rope corral, trailed his spurs to the chuck wagon. Tom Ammons squatted at the fire, blowing in his coffee cup as he watched the punchers straggle in. First glance Pistol had of that face, his heart stood still. Was it possible, in all the world, for two faces to be thus disfigured? Still, there was a difference. Juan Carrillo had worn a twisted mustache, had been arrayed in the extravagant vestments of the Mex ladrone, that fatal day. Tom Ammons was smooth shaven and affected only the customary range habiliments.

Tip Finter drew apart as he ate, studying covertly, appraising. At times he was so certain that this stranger was the one he had sought, he went hot and cold in turn. Doubt stayed his hand. Hunger appeased, he laid aside cup and plate, unholstered his Colt's, toyed with it. His eyes were terrible in their sheer animal ferocity as he focused them upon Ammons, back to the boy and joking with sawed-off Coley Cooke.

"I'm bettin'," Tip measured his low-flung words carefully, "a feller wouldn't have tuh drift more'n a hundred mile from right here tuh find the two-laigged skunk that watched Chill Finter die on the ant hills uh paisano land!"

Silently, swift as the panther he resembled, Tom Ammons whirled to the sound of Tip's stiff voice, hands darting in his bizarre cross draw. Strange how suddenly he spotted the boy's weapon, held loosely across the knees, yet pointed unwaveringly in Ammons' direction. And Tip had the hammer eared back and was just a-burnin' to let it drop. With smooth camouflage, the stranger let his hands brush past his holsters, relaxed, laughing un-

easily as his molten eyes scored the boy.

"Lippy leetle cuss, ain't yuh, crab-apple?" he sneered. "Which the same I'm passin' hit this time. Next time yuh feel like sneakin' up an' wolf-yippin' in my ears thataway, yuh best burn some pronto powder fer I'll shore be a-kickin' the cider outa yuh, complete!"

A strained silence gripped the camp. Sowbelly's jaws worked at an alarming rate upon an oversized cud and his bony knuckles showed white as he gripped the haft of an ugly "pigsticker." The Mexicans watched the play with eagerness, their black eyes snapping. Coley Cooke and Manny Mays dropped hands to the butts of their pistols and sat tense and watchful. The Pistol Kid was the coolest of the lot as he fondled the .44 and grinned into the flushed face of the man Ammons.

"Wind-belly, feller!" he taunted. "How 'bout guts tuh back 'er up?"

AMMONS whipped about, snapping his cigaret into the flames. Every line of him now spelled killer, from the narrowed, yellow-bordered eyes to the tense readiness of his avid gun hands. Into his face crept a chill glare; a wolf-like twisting of his loose-lipped mouth. He turned to face the stiff-armed duo of punchers across the fire.

"I don't aim tuh cross guns with no hell-kitten like this un," he gritted. "I'm peaceable, but you kin see he's fo'cin' my hand. If you boys don't want him salivated, git 'im away f'um me an' keep him there, permanent. No snorty longhorn kin beller an' paw alkali at Tom Ammons an' expect him tuh lie daown an' git gored. Not any!"

He rose, turned away from the fire and strode stiffly to his blanket. Tip laughed, yet in the chortle there was a stiffness they had never heard there before, a breath of a deadly purpose. The boy patted his gun, eased it into its sheath.

"Ringy, ain't he?" he mused. "Plumb cactus-coated! Hawglaig, I got a feelin' yo're 'bout tuh git notched!"

Without a word to his relieved and wondering fellows, Tip sought his bed, but not to sleep. He seethed with excitement, yet had himself under perfect control. Thinking ahead, it was not by accident that he rolled out his blankets with the woodpile between himself and the rest of the camp. The fire burned low at last and the snores of weary punchers lifted in unmusical discord. Not till then did Tip stir. Silently, stealthily, he rolled from his bed, slipped a short cottonwood log in his place and drew the covers carefully into place. Then, moving softly as the panther's tread, he rolled to a point of vantage behind a wheel of the hoodlum wagon. From there he had an unobstructed view of the tarp-covered sleepers. He had not long to wait.

He sensed rather than saw Ammons leave his bed and crawl to the side of one of the supposedly slumbering Mex herders. He sensed rather than heard sibilant whispers and wondered. What he actually saw, moments later, was the stooped form of one Edmunds Chavez silhouetted against the coals of the fire, as he crept toward the bed Tip had just quitted. And in the Mex's outstretched hand was a broad blade that glinted in the gloom.

Cold anger gripped the Pistol Kid, sent his hand in a swift stab to his weapon. But an unsullied mental process, later to make him another star in the firmament of Texas' valiant rangers, told him here was something bigger than personal feud. In that instant all doubt faded as to Tom Ammons' real identity. In that instant he knew it was by design the ten Mex *vaqueros* had crossed the line to apply to the P Bar B for driving jobs. In that instant he knew nothing mattered save that Concho Storrs know the truth.

"No driftin' cowhand," he muttered, "makes skunk tracks when he walks!"

In an instant, he saw, Ammons would know his game was suspected and precipitate gun-punctuated action. Time was short. Tip did not delay. Swiftly he made his way to the corral, eyes, ears, all his senses alert to detect the vantage of the jingler. He spotted him at length by the aroma of cigaret smoke, noted the ebb and glow of the querley, stalked the Mex as skilfully as would a gut-empty lobo. From behind the bole of a low sapling, he batted the jingler down with a short, savage blow of his weapon, remembering well Chill Finter's admonition, ". . . lay yore sight behind the ear, son, with a leetle updrag as she lands. 'Bout like notchin' aout a buildin' lawg. Puts 'em tuh sleep instanter, it does, without givin' 'em time tuh hoot fer he'p."

Before the jingler's deep groan was vented, before he had stiffened, then slumped, Tip was among the broncs, whispering for his own mount. He found the animal drowsing beside the rope barrier. One slash of his knife and he led the beast clear, leaped astride its bare back and passed swiftly and silently into the blackness, leaving the cavvy to filter onto the plain at its pleasure.

Had he known the fate in store for Coley Cooke and Manny Mays, he might have hesitated and been lost. *Quien sabe?* But his mind dwelt only upon the momentous fact that the Pool drive was in the hands of Carrillo's killers, that Concho must know at all hazards.

VI

WHERE the thin light of the haze-obscured stars played upon the supposed sleeping form of the Pistol Kid, a swart assassin tensed, whipped back an ugly blade . . . and struck. He grunted softly with surprise as the weapon jarred into weathered cottonwood instead of the yielding flesh of youth. Swift examination told Chavez the boy had outguessed them and flown. He scuttled back to waiting Tom Ammons with the word.

For a minute the renegade leader pondered this new and unsuspected angle. The boy's disappearance might mean a number of things. But because he was a Finter and because he already suspected the true identity of Tom Ammons, it was probable he lurked near, hoping to bushwhack his father's ancient enemy. So reasoned the man Ammons. It never occurred to him that Tip had gone for Concho, nor would it have alarmed him had he known. Every man out there was covered and would be promptly put away when action started. And now was the time to start it. . . .

Chavez, at a word from his leader, made the rounds of Spic beds, roused the sleepers. When they had gathered, Ammons gave them hurried whispered instructions. Like wraiths in the night, three crept upon their unsuspecting victims while two others moved stealthily toward the corral to enlist the night jingler and hold saddled broncs against the instant's need. What they did not know was that the jingler was immune to mundane cares and would be for hours to come, that the cavvy was already feeding out across the plain.

Double-edged blades found the hearts of sleeping Coley Cooke and Manny Mays, just as the one calling himself Ammons had planned it weeks before. But the third killer caught a tartar in wiry old Sowbelly Sims, who loved fighting and followed a chuck-wagon because it afforded him ample opportunity to indulge his fancy.

Sowbelly was wakeful. The reason was beans. Sunk in the hot coals of the dying fire, the hash wrangler had a Mexican clay pot of beans cooking and he was determined that they should be cooked to a turn without burning, bane of all cooks. So he lay there, thinking, drowsing, yet with his smell sense keenly focused upon the succulent odors drifting across his bed from the bean hole.

Because one can still smell beans with eyes closed, Sowbelly missed that ghost-like figure that stalked the bed of the Pistol Kid. Because the old cheffie's ears were not what they once were, he missed the veiled whisperings, the soft padding of feet as killers went about their grisly task. But sudden need of a smoke drew Sowbelly to one elbow, where he made the tiny cylinder of brown paper and tobacco, struck a match. As the tiny beam lanced the night, it seemed to the old pot wrangler that a man shape hit the dirt out there, that it lay then like a dead thing in the darkness.

To the wise man, no evidence is so small that it may not portend mighty events. So it was with Sowbelly Sims, who had been places and seen things. Dragging down a pair of deep inhalations, he flipped the querley away, reclined, composed himself as if to sleep. For a few moments he breathed heavily, then his soft snores assailed the silence. And those snores were realistic enough to have fooled a more astute stalker than Edmundo Chavez.

SLOWLY that low-lying blot detached itself from the ground, advanced stealthily, paused at length at Sowbelly's bedside, raised his bowie-armed hand for a blood letting. The roar of the cook's pistol seemed loud as a dozen rifles, yet it paled into insignificance beside the death scream of the stricken Mex, a scream that beat the sky and pulsed against the head-

land on the south side of Wild Horse Creek.

Forgotten was Sowbelly's rheumatism, his beans. Hookin' trouble again, he was, and the blood hammered at his temples as excitement gripped him. Knowing instinctively there was more to this than a killer Spic's blood lust, he leaped out of bed, caught up jeans and boots, sprinted to the covert of the chuck wagon, where he covered his "nekkedness."

It was a bad break for Ammons and his killers and they forthwith set out to rub out the old warthog. Standing tense and ready at the chuck box, Sowbelly spotted a gun-extended, sombreroed form darting his way. Swearing softly, he uncorked a pair of shots, dropped the night creeping sidewinder in his tracks. The old stalwart chuckled to know his aim had not degenerated, chuckled and stuffed shells in the empty chambers.

"Somebody misfigured!" he cackled. "I'm knowed all over Texas as a top pot slinger, but I kin shore dish up the dangdest mess uh gun-stirred hell an' damnation ever yuh wropped a lip over!"

Renegade plans, gone awry in two places already, sped onward toward a grim finale. At Sowbelly's first shot, the herd came straight up with startled bawl; the horses, snorting with fear, bolted into the night so swiftly that the two mount-hunting bravos were lucky to lay hands athwart a pair of bridle reins. Roaring curses, Ammons raced up, claimed one of the animals, ordered a swart henchman into the saddle of the other. His whole coup now depended upon a swift scotching of the raucus old pot wrangler, forted at the chuck-wagon. And so, guns belching crimson fire, they spurred furiously down upon the grizzled fighter.

Sowbelly gave them lead for lead, but theirs was the advantage in that they were moving targets. They brought him down at the second volley with a ball through the hip. Then building loops as they wheeled, the renegade pair loped away after mounts for their foot-bound compadres, Ammons roaring something about, ". . . fetchin' rifles an' ca'tridges f'um the hoodlum waggin!"

Two of his cohorts sped to do his bidding only to find blood-bespattered Sowbelly there before them. They stumbled plumb onto him before they were aware of his continued existence and one of them died too quickly to know the truth. The other one beat a hasty retreat and before they could organize to give the salty old varmint an argument, he had climbed painfully into the wagon bed and was prepared to serve 'em hot lead hell a-plenty.

Ammons returned then with mounts and luridly expressed opinions of the ". . . double-damned bushwhacker that beefed the jingler!" Hearing of Sowbelly's last exploit, he led them in a lead-slingin' charge on the hoodlum wagon, fairly riddling it. Sowbelly knocked one of them from his saddle, then went out of the scrap with a bullet-furrowed pate. As consciousness deserted him, he sniffed the air suspiciously.

"Dang you, Sowbelly," he wailed. "Now yuh've went an' let them beans burn. Shore can't figger what they boys'll eat, now that them Spics has cut me inter the camers. I hears lead a-singin' yonderly an' 'lows Concho's givin' 'em 'what fer.' Three notches, Sowbelly, thre-e-e . . . notches . . . fer . . . yore . . . ol' . . . iron!"

It was true. From across the fear-chained trail herd, came the staccato drumming of pistol fire, sound of battle, swiftly drowned out in the dread thunder of the stampede. The startled longhorns, staring red-eyed at the flicker of firelight from which had come that first burst of gunfire, were suddenly thrown into fear-frenzy as the blasting of gunpowder started along their flank at scattered points. Convulsed with panic, they leaped into a hell-bent run-bawl, the prairie floor rocking with the concussion of their pounding hoofs.

VII

WELL outside the circle of nighthawks, the Pistol Kid raced through the night, striving to pierce the blackness, striving to spot the gray hat of the trail boss, Concho Storrs. He passed a pair of riders, heard the low tenor of Ab Mayhorn, sensed that his companion was one of the treacherous henchmen of Tom Ammons, otherwise known as Juan Carrillo or Wann Creel. Oh, well, Ab had gun savvy and could handle himself in a tight.

Tip had scarcely passed the pair when

he was startled by the roar of a pistol from the camp he had just quitted. Pulling down his mount, the boy listened, heard muffled sounds of confusion, more shots, the strident cursing of Sowbelly Sims. The cattle were up in a flash, nervous, hesitant; the cavvy pounded out across the plain. Tip knew that Carrillo had struck, that men had died. But there was little time to ruminate upon such things.

From directly behind him came the bellow of a pistol, Ab Mayhorn's sobbing curse, then the swift unleashing of gun fire as the cowboy went into action. But the flashing of the weapon was down and Tip sensed somehow that Ab was done for before he drew his weapon. Thought struck him to take a hand in that ruckus, but was as swiftly rejected as shooting broke out in three places along the far-flung border of the herd. Concho was out there somewhere, might need him. . . . Tip stuck his pony with the steel and thundered alongside the stampeding herd, peering into the gloom in search of a bobbing gray hat.

Then an orange flash knifed the night off to Tip's right, the sound of burning powder lost in the awful turmoil of rattling hoofs, crashing horns, roll of bovine bawling. The boy reined swiftly over, pistol ready. Other flashes dead ahead, then the welcome oval of Concho's big hat. A mounted figure loomed before the Pistol Kid, challenged him with loudly shrieked *"quien es?"* Tip's answer was a swift-rocked pistol hammer. The Mex pitched from his saddle and his horse obliqued away from the awful thunder of the fear-maddened longhorns and was lost in the darkness.

The Pistol Kid sheathed his weapon, spurred to the side of the trail boss. Concho was folded over the horn and Tip knew without asking that he had tasted renegade lead.

"Shall I try an' turn them doggies, Concho?" the boy shrilled.

Concho got a laugh out of that, told it later with many a flourish to Bat Masterson in the Horn Saloon at Dodge. It was funny, a pistol-crazy kid hemmed by killer foes, wanting to know if he shouldn't, single-handed, try to turn four thousand locoed beef steers.

"Hell, no, Pistol," groaned the trail rod. "I'm afeard yuh'd mill 'em too danged hard, wear 'em sho't-laigged on the nigh side, an' make side hill gougers of 'em. We'd wind up then in Santa Fe 'stead uh Dodge. Let the crazy critters run; it's forty mile tuh the next break an' I'll gamble they'll tucker out afore that."

Concho coughed then, a spasm that wracked him. Pistol laid a sympathetic hand on his back, already wet with blood.

"Yuh hit hard, Concho?" he queried anxiously. "Kin I do ary thing?"

Concho shook his head. "Left shoulder!" he said laconically. "Damn Mex got me from behind. No bones, I reckon, but it hurts like billy hell. I'm gittin' old, Pistol, an' soft. I'd orta had more sense. If I cash on yuh, watch keerfully how the cards falls in this game. . . ."

A HORSE rocketed out of the blackness, slid to a halt a dozen paces away.

"Dat yo', Mars' Concho?" asked Black Bob cautiously, and the starlight glinted along the barrel of his drawn weapon. At their assuring reply, he spurred forward.

"Sho bad, dis!" he said, shaking a hatless, kinky head as he hearkened after the far-racing herd. "De crittahs jes' nachelly got de jump on Black Bob. I'd a-stopped 'em, too, 'ceptin' a daggone greaseh went loco an' stahted shootin' holes through ma tall hat. Had tuh kill de rapscallion tuh fotch him to his mannehs!"

"Where's Jace?" queried Concho anxiously. "Seen him anywheres?"

"He's daid," said the black man sadly. "When I got ma own gun business settled, Ah lopes ovah tuh see what all de shootin' was about. Seen anothah greaseh gun Jace down. Him an' me had at it, right dere. A'm a sonuvagun iffen dat no' count Mex'-can didn't shoot off my bes' hat an' I neveh did find it."

"Nev' mind yore hat!" snapped Concho petulantly. "What about the Mex?"

"Humph!" The big negro chuckled. "Ah piled ma first chancet at dat rustleh man, but de mo' Ah gits tuh thinkin' 'bout ma hat, de maddeh Ah gits an' de straighteh Ah shoots. Dat's what stahted dem beefs tuh runnin', boss, when dat Mex'can hit de groun'. He so hefty wif lead dat when he hit de earf, it done tremble, sho 'nuff."

Concho made a swift mental tally. "Jace

dead," he mused, "an' Coley, Manny an' Sowbelly likely beefed at the camp. That leaves us three an' Ab, if we kin find 'im, tuh scrap it out with them eleven Spics less the two Bob drilled an' the one Pistol sifted lead inter, a minute back."

Tip told him of his suspicions regarding Ab, told of crossing up the knife wielder, of laying the jingler out cold. When the trail boss thought of Ab's passing he went red-mad. He and Ab had been mighty close since they were kids together down Devil's River way. Swift anger dispelled Concho's wound weakness. He straightened, twisted in the stirrups.

"Here you, Pistol!" he ordered. "Tie yore bandanner onto mine an' let's git this bum wing uh mine slung. We're a-lookin' fer Ab!"

The sling was quickly fashioned and they cantered back over Pistol's route. They found the crumpled body of the renegade who had attacked the Pool puncher, but of Ab himself there was no sign. Concho felt good at that, sure in his mind that his saddle pard had loped ahead in hopes of turning the herd. As they sat their mounts, discussing their next move, Tip gasped, leveled a finger at the camp.

"Look!" he said eagerly. "Carrillo!"

The renegade leader was building up the fire and the flames were lighting the camp, revealing still forms that would never move again. Beside him were two of his compadres, one with a sleeve rolled up, the other administering first aid for a painful flesh wound. The three punchers watched silently for moments, then . . .

"Where yuh reckon the rest uh them Spics is at?" queried Concho, puzzled.

"Daid, likely!" guessed Black Bob, grimly.

The Pistol Kid laughed stiffly. "What do we keer, Concho," he queried, "whar they are? Dead or with the critters is all one tuh us. The point is, there's three of 'em over thar an' there's three of us. The odds is even. Let's ride in!"

As the Kid looked to his gun, the lines of pain lifted from Concho's weathered face. He twisted in the saddle to face the boy and there was pride showing in his gray eyes. It took a man, he reasoned, to match the guts of this quiet-spoken kid, whose courage had been molded while looking upon the face of his murdered mother. The laugh of the trail boss was free as he laid his good hand upon Tip's shoulder.

"Thanks, Pistol," he said simply, "fer showin' me my duty to our dead trail mates. Yo're younger'n me; fill my smokepole, six-ful up. We'll make 'er a wipeout!"

Tip savvied that kinda talk, being nothing if not pistol handy. In a trice he had drawn and loaded Concho's weapon and handed it back, chamber full. They were ready then to ride, Tip with an eager quietness more expressive than words; Concho with a reckless laugh upon his lips; Black Bob with the easy melody of *Sandy Land* falling softly from between perfect teeth that glistened white in the starlight.

VIII

ONLY one man — Mohammed — ascended to heaven astride a horse. But history records a legion of gallant fighters who fixed their spurs and fogged it with flashing weapons into the very hinges of hell. Of such stuff were the three who gave their ponies free rein and thundered in a fast lope toward the three renegades at the camp-fire.

Nor were the last of Carrillo's notorious raider band long in ignorance of the impending attack. Whirling swiftly to the clatter of galloping hoofs, the three palmed short guns, peered apprehensively into the gloom as they moved stealthily away from the revealing flames. Something had gone amiss; who were these swift gallopers?

But the Pool men had fanned out as they drove in and had the renegades limned against the fire.

Carrillo was the first to trigger. A leaden dart caromed off the Kid's saddle-horn with sinister whine and Tip laughed grimly as he prodded his mount to added effort, as he commenced to throw his gun, deliberately, unhurried.

Straight into the blazing hail of lead rode those three, lances of fire and smoke running from their hard-gripped pistols. And in the van was the son of Chill and Myrtie Finter—the Pistol Kid.

One of the Mex desperadoes stumbled, went to one knee, threw up his weapon for a last futile shot, then ploughed, face down, into the dust. A bullet *whupped* into Black Bob's horse, spilling him for the long count

and hurling the huge black man in a graceful parabola to a heavy fall. Not being India rubber, Black Bob lay where he had fallen.

It was Concho's unlucky day. Hardly had the trail boss gained the firelight when Carrillo's bullet smashed his right collar bone, leaving him helpless save to cling with his knees to his frightened broncho and pray the beast had savvy to avoid a lethal leading-up.

The Pool banners were in Tip's hands alone now, and the responsibility of it sent him mad, berserk. Like a devil, he charged the rustler pair, ran the leader's Mex henchman down as he turned to sprint to safety. With the man's screams dinning his ears, Tip whirled his pony to seek out Carrillo. But his animal's foot slid into a badger's hole and with the turning effort, the leg snapped like a reed. The horse screamed terribly, lurched and went down writhing. Tip lit a-running and he begrudged neither the time nor the lead to put the little beast out of its misery. Lifting his eyes from his bitter task, the Kid glimpsed his quarry, the man whose Spics had killed Myrtie Finter and raided the Boxed F, the man who had made away with Chill Finter.

CARRILLO was ahorse now and bearing down upon the boy with leveled six-gun and a grin of gloating mockery. Tip waited for him, cool, determined, waited until the man was full upon him, raised his pistol and rocked the hammer. A dead click rewarded him. His last shot had gone to finish his disabled mount.

The renegade fired then, but in his eagerness missed. Tip felt the wind from that missile as it hurtled past his cheek. With the killer's gaunt face almost in his own, the Pistol Kid hurled his empty weapon into that hated visage, heard the *chuck* of steel against flesh, saw his enemy sag. Then the horse was roaring past.

Gathering himself, Tip leaped for the blurred saddle horn, caught it, was whirled off his feet and against the horse's side, hung there precariously for the jingling of a spur, then drew himself up behind the groggy renegade. It was a mad venture, conceived, planned and executed all in one terrific burst of co-ordinated action. Nor could Tip have told why he did it save that he saw his hated foe, the one he had sworn to kill, being whirled out of his life. And now his chance was slender at last, racing into the gloom behind a bulky, fast-recovering desperado.

Watching that perilous play was one who swore a quick-uttered oath that the boss rustler should never fasten his talons at the Kid's throat. Sowbelly Sims, freshly waked from his bullet-induced stupor, sensed Tip's peril in a single glance. His rifle was still leveled across the tail gate of the hoodlum wagon and it was the work of a split second to line the sights and press the trigger. The bullet struck Carrillo's plunging horse behind the fore leg, tunneled the beast's heart and hammered it groundward, a sliding mass of quivering flesh. The cincha parted, hurling the killer into the air. And Tip, clutching him with fingers of vengeance, sailed skyward with his quarry and landed heavily atop him.

Black Bob, climbing painfully to his feet, saw that flight, caught up his gun and weaved unsteadily to the boy's assistance. He was not needed. The Pistol Kid crawled off the killer's silent form, stood beside the negro, waiting for Carrillo's first move. They were standing thus when Concho knee-reined his mount beside them. The trail boss stared at the renegade's head, doubled grotesquely beneath his thick shoulder.

"Neck's broke!" Concho gritted between set teeth. "He died nice!"

Then he fainted. Tip and Bob caught him as he tumbled from his horse, dragged him over by the fire. The negro, skilled in cow-camp surgery, found Concho's wounds and with Tip's help made shift to dress them. Intent upon their work, neither was aware of approaching riders until the camp was suddenly full of men who splashed out of the creek, wide-eyed and wondering. Pat Blaine, tugging nervously at his longhorn mustaches, was in the lead.

"Gawd, Pistol . . . Bob . . . !" breathed the P Bar B boss. "What's happened yere? Me an' the boys 'lowed we heared shootin' a spell back. Looks like hell lit here, aplenty. What the devil? Where's the herd? Is Concho . . . ?"

"Concho ain't no mo' daid'n what yo' air, boss," spoke up the negro. "He'll

come tuh life right pronto iffen yo' gives him a swig uh that co'n juice yo' keeps on yo' hip!"

THE Pistol Kid stood there glassy-eyed, tried to smile as he started his report.

"Mex hands was tied up with Carrillo. They made their play an' their gather is boothill, I reckon. Cows stompeded an' is high-tailin' some'rs 'twixt here an' Dodge. Coley an' Manny an' Jace an' Ab an' Sowbelly is all dead; Concho's bad hit an' Bob . . . he jest 'bout saved yo' ol' beef fer yuh, boss, he . . ."

The Kid's knees began to buckle and he sank slowly groundward, out on his feet. When he awoke, Bob had finished dressing a nasty wound involving three broken ribs and loss of plenty blood. It throbbed, but pain was forgotten in his joy at seeing smiling Ab Mayhorn propped up and bandaged. Concho, reinforced by a pull at Pat's bottle, was finishing his recital of their trouble. Pat Blaine smiled as he turned to the boy and grasped his hand.

"We owe yuh more'n yuh kin ever c'lect, Pistol," he said fervently. "Concho's done tolt me the hull of it, so it won't do no good tuh say we'd 'a' made out tuh save the Pool steers without the fightin' Pistol Kid. Least I kin do now is tuh send yuh back to the P Bar B an' git yuh patched up, you an' Concho."

The Kid grimaced from the pain of squaring his slender shoulders.

"Thankin' yuh kindly, boss," he grinned. "But if it's all the same tuh you, I'll stick with the herd. I signed with the Pool as a salty un an' I reckon I'll play this hand pat!"

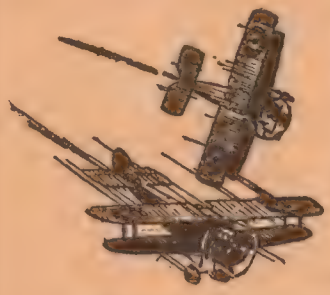
"Salty . . . heh, heh, heh!" Black Bob slapped his thick thighs and cackled. "A salty un, he says. Boss, dat boy's so dag-gone salty dem rustlehs jes' nachelly couldn't swaller."

But they couldn't hooraw the plucky Pistol Kid, just sat and stared dumbly, a crowd of big Texas range men and a moist-eyed old man. Mooning there, not knowing just what to say, they whirled to a loud and raucous voice from the wagon:

"Hey, you mavericks!"

Using his long Sharp's rifle as a crutch, Sowbelly Sims stood there, gory in his own blood, a warped smile twisting his seamed face. He sprayed the ground with juice of well-masticated fine cut, hitched up his greasy jeans.

"Beans is burnt," he advised them combatively. "An' what else I've got ain't a hell of a lot. But come an' get it or I'll throw it awa-a-a-ay!"



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ACES

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Blackfoot Breed

By WILLIAM B. CAMERON

Beat your war-drums loudly, O Snakes! Daub your faces with death umber! For a Blackfoot traitor is near—seeking your scalps for vengeance, and your loveliest maiden for bride.

A Novelet of Indian Warfare

THIS tale is salvage from the Redman's memory-log of the long ago. Gabriel Dumont, the halfbreed rebel leader, got it from Sapomaxiko the Blackfoot, and by the Cree tongue of his brother Elie it came to me. Songs and war-whoops and gestures made the telling vivid, and when he said *"Tut-tut-tut-tut!"* very rapidly you could hear the echo of flying hoofs. I listened with attention, because the Blackfoot grayheads whose pride of race has not permitted their traditions of tribal craft and daring to perish utterly will soon all be in the Sand Hills. But to you who read this tale

are neither sounds nor gestures but only words.

CROW COLLAR stood just within the broad entrance to the Soldiers' Lodge, a painted buffalo-robe folded tightly about his tall figure and the eagle-wing in his right hand screening his lip.

The big drum was mocking the peace of the night. The droning of the six drummers who sat cross-legged on the ground smiting it was high-pitched, penetrative, mystical—a nocturne of the wilderness. It filled the valley of the Bow River for miles between its lofty green walls.

Ten Snake maidens were dancing in the glow from the fire in the center of the great lodge. In the ranks of warriors squatted round the walls was an exalted company, a party of young Blackfoot returned just at the sun-setting from a far foray into the hostile Southland. The gathering was the tribute of honor paid by the nation to the adventurous handful.

A fierce light of exultation played over the copper faces of the young men as they watched the stilted shuffling of their captives. Sometimes they applauded ironically; again shouts of derisive laughter greeted some especially stumbling effort. A few of the girls made pitiful attempts to smile; others seemed impassive. Two wore sullen, defiant looks. One—she seemed the youngest, as she was certainly the most beautiful—wept silently, bitterly. By this girl the eye of Crow Collar had been caught and arrested immediately he entered the lodge. He watched her narrowly for a long time and a strange feeling stole over him. Pity was the name his thought gave to this feeling, yet a moment later he surprised himself regretting he had not been of the war-party—that he had no claim to any of the women. He noted with quickly deepening interest the lustre of her black braids, her wondrous dusk eyes, the rich coloring of her rounded tawny cheek and the perfect mould of her lithe womanly figure. And then his face clouded and he pressed the eagle-wing closer over his lip.

His disfigurement was to Crow Collar a poignant, a vital thing. Black Hand, sorcerer, had made fierce love to his mother, but she had gone with Pointed Cap and the mark was the glaring proof of the magician's baneful power and of his readiness to use it. At least, so the woman thought.

As for Crow Collar, his earliest recollections, almost, were of the unspeakable torment he had suffered by reason of the blemish at the mouth of The Wolverine, reputed son of Black Hand and the boy bully of the camp, whose gibes, like so many spear-thrusts, had driven him more often than he could recall to the home-lodge, with his head bowed in shame and the spot quivering and smarting like flesh under the branding-iron. There, while his mother, with his head strained to her bosom, had striven to soothe him he had struck her passionately with his small brown fists, for that she had borne him into the world with a lip divided like a rabbit's.

"Wait; *ponima* I will pay him!"

This remark, following such an eruption, showed the fixed mental attitude of Crow Collar the boy toward his persecutor. He was older now but he had not forgotten The Wolverine or his gibes of his own verbal promise to pay, "bye-and-bye." Such things no Indian ever does forget.

At length a buck with a riding-whip strode over to the girl.

"Dance!" he shouted angrily. "Do you think The Wolverine brought you so far to see you snuffle like a sick child? *Ugh!* No; he brought you to bear him children, to fill his lodge with Blackfoot sons, not with waterdrops. Keep your tears until they grow up and go to war against the Snakes. Then, if they do not come back, you may weep. Dance!"

He raised his arm and the heavy lash descended across her face.

In the eyes of Crow Collar all things grew red. Why he could not have said nor did he pause to consider, but the blow stung him as if it had fallen upon his own skin. The smothered fire of his wrongs burst into flame, suffocating, blinding him. He stood for an instant like a man stunned; then he was rocking back and forth in the middle of the lodge with his hands sunk in The Wolverine's throat.

"Dog!" he cried. "No Blackfoot sons will you ever breed but maggots, for you were bred with maggots in the heart of a rotten tree. Coyote, coward!"

That The Wolverine was a foundling,

picked up at the foot of a blasted cottonwood, was no fault of his own; none the less he resented bitterly any allusion to this unrelished ambiguity concerning his birth. A sudden lurch loosed the vice-like grip at his throat, and springing back he stood glaring at his opponent, a knife in his hand and murder in his eyes. He crouched like a cougar for a spring, but before he could throw himself upon Crow Collar the two head-soldiers seized him from behind. He struggled furiously for a moment and his face was distorted with hate.

"Two Mouths!" he gasped at length. "The Wolverine is a brave. With what he takes from the enemy he does as he pleases. But Two Mouths dare not go to war. He hides behind the old women. And he calls The Wolverine coward! *Wus!*"—he pointed a contemptuous finger at Crow Collar—"*Rabbit-Lip*—and *Rabbit-Heart!*"

The face of Crow Collar flushed hot with shame; his hand shot up mechanically to hide the offending blemish. He glanced diffidently toward the girl and saw the look of startled gratitude in her eyes. He held her gaze, and by one of those intuitive flashes she understood that he had something of moment to impart. Under cover of his robe, Crow Collar then made some rapid gestures in the sign language visible only to her and passed out.

II

CROW COLLAR was as ready in action as he was swift to think, and before he had reached his lodge the ideas which had instantly filled his brain arranged themselves in a definite plan of resolve. He threw off his robe, daubed his face with vermilion and got out his war-bonnet. A thick belt, studded with brass nails, hung loosely about his middle; it supported a huge knife, the haft of which showed formidably above the leather.

He unrolled a pair of richly beaded leggins and inside the right, with thongs of antelope-hide, he fixed a scabbard. After placing a second knife in this and singing softly to the gods of the Blackfoot for their favoring care, he drew on the leggins.

From his own he went to the chiefs lodge, from which he took two saddles and a roll of dried meat. Close at hand the best horses of the camp grazed at the ends of their picket-lines. He loosed the two fleetest and led them to a bluff of poplars behind the lodge, where he secured them among the trees.

These preparations occupied some time. The warriors had wearied of baiting their captives. A war-dance was in movement; they were counting coups. The girls had been sent to the lodges of their different captors, whose proper wives might be relied upon to anticipate any move to escape on the part of those who should become their slaves and sharers in their burden of child-bearing. But, in any case, the Snake country was far; there was small likelihood of the idea of escape occurring to any of the girls.

The loud boasting of The Wolverine sounded through the camp and a coyote on a hill barked in answer. Crow Collar's lips framed a silent laugh:

"Small Mocker! He is of your sort, yes; a good thief, but a bad fighter. And he took the pick of the spoil. To rob the den of Kakwahakwis, The Wolverine, thief and worker of evil, is no dishonor; *chee*, Mahaginis?"

The braggart had finished his vaunting. From the Soldiers' Lodge again rose the throb of the drum and the chanting of the drummers. The head-dancer was beginning the rite of Spearing the White Dog, and from the place of concealment where he had flung himself in the grass beside The Wolverine's tent, Crow Collar lay watching the grotesque reflection of the dancer's movements as with spear upraised he crouched and circled in manner of attack above the great kettle of steaming dog-flesh. After the ceremony they would eat the meat, which is the food of warriors. Then they would mutter the cabalistic words which shield the brave from the Evil Spirit of the Dark and dancing slowly round the lodge, pass out to bed.

"It is time," muttered Crow Collar.

Conversation and the fires in most of the lodges had died, showing that the occupants slept. Crow Collar arose and approaching the door of The Wolverine's lodge, he lifted the flap and peered in. The inmates, wrapped in their robes, lay round the walls; only one half-blind woman, a mother-in-law of The Wolverine, nodded

above the embers in the center, guarding the Snake girl.

Her Crow Collar discerned at once. Her eyes were fixed upon his face and he made a sign which, in the light of the gestures earlier in the Soldiers' Lodge, she interpreted and obeyed instantly. She rose noiselessly, and as she stepped from the lodge Crow Collar caught her hand. They ran together to the horses and he lifted her in his arms to seat her on the famous buffalo-runner of the Blackfoot. As she lay for a brief moment next his heart, he felt the blood bound madly through his veins. And he knew then that he was ready to fight his whole nation if need be to restore this daughter of his nation's enemy to her own people.

They moved stealthily off, riding side by side, the shuffle of their horses soundless in the heavy grass. The coyote on the hill yapped again and Crow Collar smiled grimly.

"Good night, Small Mocker," he whispered. "Crow Collar may not answer, but soon The Wolverine will howl to keep you company."

In a few minutes the boom of the drum had been swallowed up in the night behind them, and with faces toward the south and horses going strongly they were fairly started on their long ride to the country of the Snakes.

AS the sun was rolling across the peaks of the Rockies a wave of rose and purple splendor, Crow Collar turned from the plain into a coulee which entered the foothills on the right and dismounted beside a spring beneath a grove of poplars. Many leagues lay between them and the Blackfoot camp. The night had passed in silence and a steady gallop.

"How are you called?" he asked as he helped the girl off her horse. He was fairly familiar with the Snake tongue, while she knew a little Blackfoot; in the use of the sign language both were adept. She pointed to an early butterfly, hovering near on jet and crimson wings.

"Ah!" said Crow Collar, and he put the name in a word of his own—"Komuksa."

He unsaddled and led the horses away to graze on the rich grass farther up the valley. When he returned Komuksa was bathing her face in the cool water of the spring. He drew the knife at his belt and cut a piece of the dried meat for the girl.

"Eat," he said. "Soon, when the horses have fed, we must ride again. Though they try they will not catch us; but we may not stop, yet. Tomorrow, perhaps. Eat now, and rest a little."

The meat was her accustomed food and she was young and vigorous; she ate with relish. After, he spread his robe for her and she lay down and closed her eyes. In a moment she was sleeping like a child.

His sensitiveness, at the root of which was his disfigured lip, had made of Crow Collar a silent, reserved man. He had grown up with few friends—none among the gentler sex—and to find himself suddenly the protector of so trusting and beautiful a bud of womanhood as Komuksa thrilled and amazed him. The thought that she could so unquestioningly surrender herself to his keeping and his power was a challenge to the best instincts of his nature. As he watched her deep untroubled breathing a great tenderness crept into his heart, and when at length he felt compelled to awake her he did so with gentle reluctance, though the sun was high and the horses had been saddled for many minutes.

Late in the afternoon there was a second brief interval for food. When next they stopped the eternal spires were once more aflame and each jeweled grass-blade was flashing a greeting to the new morning. Their halting place was a little basin in the hills, beside a creek fringed with cottonwoods.

"We will rest here till night," said Crow Collar. "We shall be safe. Sleep, Butterfly; your eyes are heavy."

He spoke in Blackfoot, translating for her into signs; touching his eyelids, resting the side of his head on his hand to spell slumber. He said more—much that he did not translate, for the language was that of love. If pleased him to be able to do this; if she had known more of his tongue his words would have been few. The sun was setting when they again took up their journey.

They were resting next day after a night of travel. Crow Collar had been asleep, but he was awake now and lay on his back, gazing up through the delicate tracery of the poplar foliage at the ineffable blue of the sky. He was making a little song, and

when it was fixed in his head he began softly in Blackfoot to sing it. Translated, the words as nearly as possible were these:

"Sleep! Sleep!
The way is long;
Sleep!
Your heart is strong.
Sleep!
Though cold the night,
By day the sun is bright,
So sleep.
The wind is sweet and warm,
Dream not of harm;
Watch by thy bed I keep:
Sleep, sleep!
Sleep!

"Sleep! Sleep!
Your eyes are bright,
Sleep!
As stars at night;
Sleep!
Though dark the sky,
No star I need so thou art by;
So sleep.
The wind is sweet and warm,
Think not of harm;
Guard over you I keep:
Sleep, sleep!
Butterfly, pretty one,
Sleep!"

He turned on his elbow and lay watching her. The scent of the sweetgrass was heavy on the summer wind. The creek murmured contentedly between banks of odorous rose-blooms; here and there tiger-lilies flamed in the bald golden yellow of the prairie-floor. The sound of the horses greedily cropping the lush grass floated to his ears. Overhead was the whispered rustling of the light green leaves. No other sound disturbed the languorous quiet.

He moved nearer her. Her cheek was flushed and moist. One plump bare arm lay beneath the little head, with its wealth of midnight hair. The delicate, rounded bosom rose and fell gently with her deep full breaths. Her lips were slightly parted.

He was looking down into her face. His head sank, lower, lower. A gust of unconquerable emotion swept over him, and next his lips pressed hers in one swift passionate kiss.

She awoke with a startled cry, placing the back of her hand upon her mouth. The eyes she turned upon him were full of a deep and wondering reproach.

"I trusted you and you deceived me," she said at length. The tears welled slowly over their barriers. "I did not think you would. You are a strong man and I am only a girl whose heart is on the ground!"

Crow Collar bowed his head; then raised it suddenly, plucked the knife from his belt and thrust it almost fiercely into the girl's hands. He threw back his robe, baring his chest.

"Strike!" he cried. "Here is my heart! Go in safety to your people! No horse in all the Blackfoot land can overtake you. Leave me to feed the ravens. I could not help it, Butterfly, but I would not harm you."

Her tears stopped, and presently with gentle insistence she forced the knife back upon him.

"Put it up, Crow Collar," she said in her soft tones. "I have already stabbed you with my quick words. You are good; you are brave. You will forget, and we will go on as before."

Crow Collar slowly returned the knife to his belt. "Yes, I will forget," he answered quietly, though he knew he should never forget. "And now it is time to go."

On the morning of the fifth day as they rode slowly along—they were already many hours within the river boundary of the Snakes—the girl turned to Crow Collar and said abruptly:

"Tonight you will take the horses and return to your own land. From the hills, yonder, I can walk in a day to the Snake village."

He did not reply at once, and a deep longing and sadness came into his eyes.

"Why should I leave you tonight?" was his slow answer.

"Why?"

Her voice sounded cold and unpleasant; she was looking over the vast sweep of plain, but away beyond anything her eyes rested upon.

"Your people are cruel and terrible in war. Have not the Snakes cause to judge? You should know that we, the Snakes, do not love the Blackfoot."

"I do not know that I love my own people, much," he said gloomily after a pause. "They have been cruel to me, too. They say I am afraid to go to war, but that is not true."

He was holding his hand over his lip.

"I will ride with you to your village," he added stubbornly. "I wish the Snakes to know that it was I, Crow Collar, who took their Butterfly out of the trap and set her

free in the lodges of her own nation."

A gleam of triumph flashed over her face, but it passed quickly and her look was hard again as she said half-disdainfully, half-pityingly:

"I said you were brave, but you are a fool, too. You are a strong man and I am a weak girl. If you will come I cannot stop you, but if trouble overtakes you do not blame the Black Butterfly!"

He flushed deeply at her words, but he bit his lip and they rode on in silence.

At noon next day they were nearing a little rise, when she drew in her horse and said hurriedly:

"Our village is just beyond the hill, yonder. My brother is chief of the Snakes, and if you love your life, follow me and *ride*. If any man can save you it is my brother. But you must reach his lodge. If you are caught before . . ."

She did not finish the sentence. They passed over the rise and the village lay just below them. The chief's lodge, from its appearance and position, was easily distinguishable in the foreground. The girl drove her moccasined heels sharply against the ribs of her horse and shot forward, Crow Collar following closely. They dashed up to the door of the lodge, flung themselves off their horses and entered. Already the first faint mutterings of the storm soon to burst about the Blackfoot were making themselves audible in the camp.

III

THE chief sat alone in his lodge. He was an immense man of middle age and did not, Crow Collar thought, in the least resemble his sister. He was greatly surprised to see the girl. He listened with a dignified interest as she related briefly the circumstances of her escape, and when she had finished and rose to leave, he shook the Blackfoot warmly by the hand.

"Welcome," he said, "to the village of the Snakes. The Black Butterfly is the flower of her people. There is not one of my young men but will thank you. While you stay in our country my lodge will be your home. Rest without fear. When you are ready to leave, though our nations be at war you will go in peace."

He stepped to the door and called aloud the tidings of his sister's return. A moment later four headmen, councillors of the band, entered. Their greetings were not what the chief's words had led Crow Collar to expect. It created in the Blackfoot a feeling of resentment, also of uneasiness.

The talk that ensued lasted long and waxed loud. A proposal to spare an enemy was not calculated to arouse enthusiasm in these men, particularly at this time. Three had daughters or nieces still in the Blackfoot toils. They were overjoyed, to be sure, that the Black Butterfly was come among them, but—their own girls; what of them? Besides, the code of tribal warfare made no provision for sparing enemies. To come by any chance within the power of his foes was the one inexcusable slip of a warrior and there was only one penalty. Captivity read death. It was true there had been instances, but . . .

At length the chief thought he saw a way out of the maze. He sent for his sister. She took a seat near the door. He eyed her thoughtfully for a space; then he said:

"Will you marry this man who has brought you back safely to your own people?"

Such a union meant security for the Blackfoot, though it was not this that made his heart leap wildly within him. But when presently his eyes sought hers, the tumult in his blood died quickly. What he read there gave him no ground for elation. She seemed to be regarding with undissembled repugnance his misshapen mouth.

"Sa!" she said shortly, and ran out of the place.

The talk grew in violence, until later there was a second summons to the girl. That it pleased her little was apparent from her manner when she came.

"My sister," said the chief gravely, "this man saved your life. If not your life, at least he saved you from that which would make you wish for death like sleep. You should be glad to do this, that I ask. Marry this man and make him one of us, a warrior of the Snakes."

She did not so much as look at Crow Collar—merely said "No!" more emphatically, even, than before, and darted out of the lodge.

The chief was vexed. He had some sense

of honor, of obligation, and would willingly save the Blackfoot if he could. But he had staked his amiable impulse upon an issue, one he had thought would have secured this object, and it seemed to be in danger of going against him. Unless his wishes prevailed and she accepted her rescuer, the outlook was not pleasant for the Blackfoot.

Crow Collar was thinking this also, when for the third time the girl's presence was commanded. She entered with an angry toss of her head.

"Girl," said the chief sternly, "unless you take this man he must die. Surely you do not wish that a brave warrior should lose the life he risked to return you to your friends?"

She threw herself back defiantly, her eyes flashing.

"Let the council do with him as they will; it is nothing to me!" Fury possessed her; her voice rang with passion.

"I will not marry him!" and turning she ran from the lodge.

This display of apathy on the part of the girl—worse, of a calculated antipathy she did not even take the trouble to disguise—confounded the Blackfoot. Almost he could doubt the testimony of his senses. So it was for *this* he had served her! *Ha-ha-hoy!* But was she merely indifferent? No! There was more. Like The Wolverine, she *despised* him because of his distorted lip. Why had he not left her to the custody of her brutal captor? If he had that ride to do over—if he could have known!

Her beauty—he would spoil *that!* He thought with fierce regret that her soft flesh might even then be nothing but an ugly blot on the prairie, wolves and buzzards scuffling over it. . . . Yet she had warned him; told him not to blame her. She had said, too, that he was a fool. And she was right—she herself had proved it to him! Yes, he was a fool, just a fool with a harelip!

He was half famished. They had offered him neither food nor drink—had passed him not even a pipe, an omission constituting in itself a purposed and significant insult, for to smoke with his guest is the invariable token of the redman's amity.

The chief, at the demand of the council, permitted him to be stripped; they left him only his loin-cloth, his moccasins and his beaded leggins. They had asked the girl if he had about him any weapons beside the knife in his belt, and she said he had not. She could not, of course, know of the knife placed by him inside his right leggin when preparing for the start.

By this time it had grown quite dark. The chief had declared that while he remained in his lodge no violence should be done the Blackfoot, so that for the present he was not further molested. Crow Collar had reason to know, however, that this respite would be brief. Still, his nerve did not leave him, and his mind was balanced and active, though he must have admitted that his thoughts were not cheerful.

Outside, there was a mounting uproar. The nation was clamoring for the Blackfoot's blood. Curiosity seemed to possess them. They wished to see, to touch him, and began to slit the leathern walls of the lodge with their knives. The slits grew broader, longer. Soon the Blackfoot was the centre of a wall of dusk and hostile faces, for the leathern lodge-covering hung in ribbons upon its supporting skeleton of poles. And all the while he saw through the design of their simulated curiosity. They would void the mandate of the chief by removing the lodge bodily over his head!

Only the chief and Crow Collar had remained in the lodge. Now others commenced to crowd in. The big Snake sat smoking stolidly at the upper end. He had gone as far as he felt called upon in the stranger's behalf. He did not desire the Blackfoot's death, but he could not override the voice of the council, the nation's will. At all events, he did not. If an enemy was so reckless as to put himself in the power of his foes, that was his lookout.

In each of the Plains tribes there was, and probably is, even yet, a secret organization known as the Society of Crazy Dogs. When you get off a train at some railway station in the West and are struck by the martial appearance on the platform of a buck in a blanket with a stiff roached shock of hair bristling like a paint brush immediately over his forehead, know that you are gazing on a member of the order of Crazy Dogs, the Masonic fraternity of the redman.

Exactly what is the nature of their ritual is known, probably, only to members of the order themselves; it is sufficient that the

Crazy Dogs enjoy certain admitted privileges and exemptions. For example, they abrogate to themselves the right (doubtless within limits), as members of the organization, to disregard with impunity the laws of the council or the sentiment of the nation. In other words, the Crazy Dogs act entirely upon impulse, initiative, and demand and are accorded immunity for anything they may do. It is, furthermore, a tradition of the order that its young men fear neither man nor the powers of darkness, or yet death.

Two of these young men were looking in at the Blackfoot through the wrecked walls of the lodge. One of them said in an undertone to the other:

"He does not try very hard to save his life, eh? If I was chief and the Black Butterfly was my sister, I should do something beside sit still and smoke."

"Yes," agreed the other warmly. "For her one would do much."

Komuksa stood in the shadow just behind them. There was an inscrutable gleam in her dark eyes. Shortly after, the two young men were in an adjacent lodge painting their faces as for war with vermilion and putting on their feathered war-bonnets with the buffalo-horn points at the sides. Then they emerged from the lodge, singing the song of their order.

It has an uncomfortable ring to it. The warriors crowded round the chief's lodge turned and looked into a storm—represented by the blackness of the night. Out of it rolled thunder—the song of the Crazy Dogs. And they fell back hurriedly as a red twin-fork of deadly lightning, in the form of the two vermilion-smeared young men, clove its way through their midst and in at the door of the chief's lodge.

Each carried a war-club, with knife-blades fixed in the side near the top. They dropped one on either hand of the prisoner and sunk the clubs in the ground beside them to the right and to the left, out of his reach. Then they again took up the song of the Crazy Dogs.

If the Blackfoot had had any doubt as to his fate before, assuredly he had none now. His hour was come. For a moment he sat like a statue, his right hand resting beneath his thigh inside the leggin. Then the hand leaped out and a heavy knife plunged deep into the side of the young Crazy Dog on his right. He whirled and drove it through the other.

The men who had been crowding him, menacing him with looks and pushes, rose as one body and hurled themselves in a terror-frenzy through the slashed walls of the lodge; only the great chief towered to his feet, unscared, terrible. On him Crow Collar flung himself, without pause, recklessly. The giant stood for a breath with an ashen face. Crow Collar struck again, and the strong man went down like wheat before the sickle. The knife had finished its work.

The Blackfoot sprang over his body through the lodge-walls into the swarm of his persecutors, fighting madly to get away, anywhere, beyond the arm of this sudden Nemesis. Crow Collar ran, too; in the crowd, with the crowd, into the darkness which made him, to them, a fugitive like themselves. Yes, and a fugitive he was, too, though he ran with courage, not in fear, and with brains as well as thighs.

His keen eye had noted as he rode toward the camp in the afternoon a clump of poplars in a low spot a short distance from the village. Toward this his course was directed.

The panic-fear left them presently and the Snakes paused in their flight. Not so Crow Collar, and then it was that the rush of his rapid feet told them he was escaping. Like a hound-pack taking the scent, they broke into a chorus of furious howls and sped after him.

Crow Collar was first to reach the bluff and he plunged directly into its sombre depths. The Snakes halted at its edge; they dared not follow in the darkness. But they circled the grove with fires and lay beside them, watching, waiting. It was a simple matter to hold him there through the night. At daybreak . . . !

But the sun in its up-getting does not always fulfil the promise of its going-down, and the morning brought only disappointment to the Snakes.

IV

ON the tumbled summit of a tall spur of the Rockies commanding the plain on which stood the lodges of the Snakes, a man waited for the dawn. Beneath him, and perhaps a mile away, the watch-fires strung a girdle of sullen red about the bluff

in which the Blackfoot had lost himself to his pursuers on the night before. To the waiter's ears, even at that distance, there floated at intervals the low wail of women mourning their dead.

As the stars faded slowly from the sky, shadowy forms flitted in and out of the flickering fire-glow, and presently a battery of hoarse war-cries arose in the still air. The man on the mountain strained his eyes. He saw a dark contracting line shrink itself suddenly upon the bluff, and when the crackling cadence of exploded guns reached his ear he smiled a gratified and grisly smile.

He saw the units, the Snake warriors who had formed the line, stream presently out of the bluff again and scatter over the surrounding prairie, searching the grass. Evidently they did not find what they sought—but it is hard, especially after a dewless night, to track a man over ground which has been trodden for weeks by all the feet, human and other, that make up the life of a great Indian camp.

The Blackfoot had disappeared! How? Of what use was it to ask? If his "medicine" was so powerful that the Strong Spirits were his servants, how could *they* tell whether he had sailed out over the tops of the trees or passed beneath them as they watched? In any case, he was doubtless ere this far enough away. Meanwhile, to turn to matters in which they had a more substantial and immediate concern, this place was an unlucky place, a *haunted* place, and the village should be moved that very day.

And the man on the mountain, as he watched the lodges fall, smiled again his grisly smile. He had a harelip.

AS recently as twenty years ago the traveler in the far Northwest, on either side of the International Boundary, would have observed along the banks of many streams and lakes hundreds of hard-beaten paths. These were the trails made by the immense buffalo-herds, and invariably they led to water. As they neared the spring or favorite drinking stand the trails converged and occasionally were merged in a single narrow track, worn by the endless procession of hoofs deep below the surface of the ground.

When Crow Collar entered the bluff he made his way quickly to its centre, and here, to his delight, he came upon a pool a stone-toss in breadth. He flung himself down beside it and drank deeply of the cool water. After a brief rest he arose and started round the pool. He had made but a step when, his foot dropping suddenly beneath him, he fell heavily to the earth. Reaching back to ascertain what had tripped him, his touch rested upon something which aroused his immediate interest.

He groped eagerly in the dark and his hands soon told him that he had stumbled upon a trail. It led toward the camp, and at first he supposed it was the water-road of the Snakes and their beasts. Further exploration convinced him, however, that it was too deep to have been made by them. He left it, and carefully skirting the pool, picked it up again on the farther side.

Here was a significant find—an old buffalo-trail crossing the bluff from side to side directly through the pool! The active mind of the Blackfoot instantly saw in it a possible avenue of escape, a pathway leading to freedom and safety.

He followed it cautiously to the edge of the timber. Just opposite two fires were blazing, beside which the Snakes clustered like bees. Now was as favorable a time as any for his attempt. There was still much talk and excitement about the fires. Later, it would die away; the guards would be more alert.

He lay down in the trail. It was too narrow to admit of his lying flat, yet so deep that his shoulder rose barely above its level. As the Snake camp was clearly many moons old, the place had not recently been frequented by buffalo and the trail at points was almost buried in grass.

Slowly, very slowly, he worked himself along, using his knees, his elbows, his fingers, his toes. After a time—he had made only a few yards—he met an obstruction; a boulder, fallen out of the side of the ditch, barred his way. He drew his knife and patiently cut a path round it.

The hours dragged and it was already late when he at length reached a point directly in line between the two nearest fires. Luckily, the grass was high, yet he groaned inwardly. The ground about seemed so glaringly lighted! How could he hope to escape detection? He lay perfectly still, daring scarcely to breathe.

A man at the fire faced suddenly round. He raised his head, listening intently; then moved toward the bluff.

A woman standing near followed after him, but in a moment turned sharply and came straight toward the Blackfoot. Crow Collar clutched his knife, She stopped immediately over him and looked down. Her eyes rested squarely upon his face. It was like a flash, that swift, piercing glance lasting but for an instant.

The heart in Crow Collar boomed like a mighty drum; the blood drove in a torrent to his head. Had she seen him? How could she have helped it? And yet—no! It could not have been. She would have been the first to avenge herself upon him, to alarm her people. The woman was—Komuksa!

The man came toward her, searching the ground in front of him. Was it chance, or—what? As he neared her side one arm was thrust suddenly out and a fold of the robe which covered her shoulders fell across the head and body of the Blackfoot.

"There—in the grass!" she exclaimed, pointing. "A bird. I saw it flutter."

The man grumbled something in Snake and they walked back to the fire.

And Crow Collar had believed he had not made a sound!

It was a long time before he ventured to stir again. Then he took fresh heart—surely the gods of the Blackfoot were befriending him!—and he moved a little faster. Only just a trifle, though—an inch at a time. It was an hour before he was well out of the glow, with the fires on either hand behind him over his shoulders. After that he was really moving; soon he had left the trail and was crawling through the grass. And next he got upon his legs and ran, as he had seldom run before.

He had noted the mountain-spur earlier in the day and he made toward it. Then he climbed and climbed in the darkness to the highest point he could find. And thus it was that Crow Collar sat among the rocks on the summit and watched the Snakes' bootless attack on the bluff and the subsequent flitting of the camp. Apparently the simple secret of his exit from the bluff remained undiscovered, his disappearance an unsolvable riddle.

One smoky dot alone marked the old camp site, the lodge containing the dead. In the afternoon thirty of the young men came and looked in at the dead-lodge, then rode off again. All day Crow Collar rested in the shadows of his retreat and saw the new village rear itself an hour's lope away. And when at length the night fell he descended from the clouds and came out onto the plain to do things.

IT might be supposed that the further interest of the Blackfoot in the Snakes would be limited to placing the greatest possible distance between them and himself with the least possible delay, and that he would have started immediately on his return to his own land. Nothing, however, was further from Crow Collar's mind.

There were several things he required—food, for example; his body cried for it—and he had no intention of leaving without at least an effort to secure them. Then he had his reputation as a warrior to establish; his nation would look for the customary proofs. Lastly, he had ridden to the Snake country, and—it was a long way back.

He ran to the dead-lodge in the old village. There was no fear of the Snakes being about; the spot was haunted and not to be visited by them after nightfall for the future. The dead lay about the walls in silent and ghastly state. They were arrayed in their most gorgeous robes. Beside them rested their arms; also tobacco and dried buffalo-meat for their journey to the Sand Hills. The beautiful saddle near the chief told that his favorite horse had been slain that he might bear his master on the long road.

The Blackfoot removed the war-plait from the scalp of the big chief and tucked it in his belt. He was about to treat the others similarly, but he paused with the blade in his hand when he looked upon their bright and tranquil faces. A feeling almost of pity stirred in his breast; they were so young! He had killed them without compunction when his own life was so fiercely menaced, but now he regretted the extremity that had made the sacrifice necessary. After all, to carry away the scalp of the great chief of the Snakes was honor enough.

The knife went back in its sheath with a snap and he turned again to the big warrior. He took off his holiday trappings;

his beaded buckskin shirt, his headdress of eagle-plumes and the metal and other ornaments upon his wrists, his ankles, his hair. He ate some of the meat and placed a portion inside the shirt for his homeward journey. Then he picked up the saddle and the chief's rifle and went out.

Assuredly, one would think, he must have been satisfied now—but wait.

He went toward the new village of the Snakes. He was only a single man; no danger was to be expected from him—so the enemy would think. He would be only too glad to make good his escape; by this time he was far away.

Thus, what superficially might seem to have been the maddest of daring on the part of this painted man was really but the evidence of his calm, logical thought, his superb courage, his splendid nerve. In truth, the risk he ran in thus dogging their movements was slight.

Of course, they had his horses—the buffalo-runner of his chief and the other. He approached the camp with extreme caution, pausing often to make sure he was not discovered. At length he reached their horse-herd. Some of the best animals were picketed. He selected five, secured four together and jumping on the back of the fifth moved quietly off. The Snakes mourned their chief. They neither heard him nor missed the horses.

So Crow Collar returned at length with the scalp at his belt and triumph in his breast to his own land. When the Blackfoot lodges came in sight he stopped and daubed his face, the lower half with a charcoal paste—made the night before—the death-paint. Then he mounted the scalp at the top of a pole and rode into the camp slowly, singing.

The people streamed from the lodges and gazed upon him in dumb show. They had not looked to see him again. They knew the Snakes! He advanced, regarding them not at all, to the center of the village. Then he halted and called aloud the name of the chief. The head Blackfoot came, and Crow Collar placed in his hands the lines of four horses. One bore the saddle of the Snake.

"To make peace!" he said. Not another word. But it seemed enough.

They bore him to the council-lodge. He told his story. When he had finished the camp rang with his praise. The people shouted. They cried:

"Crow Collar of the Blackfoot! *Ah-kum-ay-ma! E-yah-ha-hoy!* Riches and honor! A high seat in the council! Horses and wives—a lodge filled with children! Crow Collar of the Blackfoot! *E-yah-hoy!*"

Crow Collar was so pleased that he forgot for a moment even his ugly lip. But the acclaim brought him also sadness, because it made him remember Komuksa, the Snake girl. If only he could have had her, he would not ask for other wives. And now her brother's blood was on his hands; never could he hope that she would think of him with anything but loathing. Still, he should have liked to satisfy himself that she had not seen him that night in the ditch. . . .

If he had known the truth, Crow Collar need have troubled himself little over the chief's death so far as Komuksa was concerned.

At noon next day the sun glared angrily through fat yellow smoke-clouds. Crow Collar had expected to encounter The Wolverine. He asked Iyakasin, the war-chief, about him.

"*Eigh!* he went afoot after you and the girl. He made an oath that when he returned you should be feeding the ravens."

That night a party of young braves arrived from buffalo-hunting. The sky in the south was red as blood. Said the leader:

"We were on the border of the Snake country. We came across The Wolverine in the river bottom. Fire swept the prairie. It caught The Wolverine. He is dead."

"I said maggots," said Crow Collar.

Now the telling of the great happiness that came to Crow Collar only remains.

V

KOMUKSA sat alone in her lodge in the Snake camp. She was very unhappy. She seemed to have lost everything she had valued in the world. Her thoughts went back to her earliest recollections, to her home on the banks of the Yellowstone and the Snake raid that had cost her her Crow father. It had been led by the man who had called her "Little Sister." She had been brought up in his lodge; he had been kind to her, yet she had never forgiven him. He was dead now. No, she told herself,

she was not sorry. Anyway, he was himself to blame.

He had promised protection, and he ruled the Snakes. If he had really wished he might have saved the Blackfoot, probably, without making her marriage with him the condition. Why should he have forced upon her, a defenceless girl, the responsibility for the man's life? That she resented fiercely. And, he had killed her father! No, decidedly, she was not sorry.

Next she thought of The Wolverine, of the dash of the Blackfoot on the berrying-party of young men and girls on the day she had been carried away captive, and of another death—that of her lover. *Her* lover; she was not his. When he had begged her to become his wife, she had met his importunities with a laughing, "No, I am your friend, your old friend, but you can marry my pretty little sister." She had no sister.

Still, she had liked the boy, and her heart was steeled against Crow Collar throughout their long ride to the Snake village. He was a Blackfoot! But she could not altogether betray him. She knew that he loved her. She saw it in his eyes; she could not dismiss the memory of his passionate outburst on that day when he had thought she slept and had —kissed her! There was something fine about that; something to win admiration from any woman, be she ever so grudging, so cold, so bitter. Her heart melted a little; she tried to send him back. She knew his danger if he came to the village. When he would not go, she was furious.

And now all was over. A great loneliness was upon her, and deep in her troubled bosom a wee, tireless tongue was whispering, whispering, night and day, sunshine and starshine: *"Go, go!"*

ALL that is here written Komuksa a week later told to Crow Collar as they sat, the divine love-light in their eyes, very near together, in the Blackfoot's lodge—all but one thing. She had arrived in the camp an hour before, riding the Blackfoot buffalo-runner, weary unto death, yearning like a bereaved child for companionship, for sympathy, for welcome, yet with her little heart fluttering wildly like the wings of the gaudy insect from which she took her name. How would he receive her?

With downcast eyes she had said, lamely, that she had brought back the horse on which he had seated her when she went away; that she had not thought it right the Snakes should keep him. Also, she had wished to tell Crow Collar—and here cruel blushes burned her cheek—that she was sorry; had tried to help him; had seen him that night in the ditch. Perhaps he had not known?

And without a word he had taken her in his arms and carried her into his lodge.

"And so," he said when all her story was done, "you believed you hated me because you had lost your boy friend? And I, because of my ugly mouth?"

She took his face in her small hands and pressed a kiss upon the spot—that spot that had been like a blight upon his life, had exposed him to the sting of envenomed tongues, had caused him to shrink within himself and to be branded coward! A great wave of feeling swept over this strong man of the wilderness; he could not speak.

"You are my elk," she murmured, "splendid! Of your mouth I never thought. But now my lips have touched it. Never again shall you feel shame by reason of the mark our gods and your mother gave you at your birth."

He looked up, inexpressible gratitude in his speaking eyes.

"Sweet Heart," he said in his deep voice, "your lips are a medicine-flower that would charm the sickness from all wounds. From today I will wear the mark like a warrior does his plumes!"

The thing that she had not told him Crow Collar learned many years afterward, when the peace-pipe passed between the Blackfoot and the Snakes. That was that the young Crazy Dogs had meant to save his life. He questioned Komuksa, and when he understood that it was she for whom they had suffered he knew why he had denied himself the victorious warrior's dearest right and been satisfied with the chief's scalp. He went alone to the top of a hill, forbidding anyone to come near him. There, for three days, he lay naked upon the ground, neither eating nor drinking, his arms and legs slashed and bleeding, heaping dust upon his head.

That was the atonement of Crow Collar.

A Complete Action Novelet

Gamblers of Empire

By CAPT. WINFIELD CARTER

Another adventure of Kid Orange—this time he rides in the vanguard of the flaming zealots who dreamed of making California the great new Empire of the western world. A colorful action story, true to history—a faithful picture of stirring, early-day San Francisco, of men of action who builded better than they knew.

FROM inside the El Dorado, borne on a reeking, smoke-laden atmosphere, came a click of poker chips, punctuated by coarse laughter and even coarser oaths. Outside passed a never-ending throng of pleasure-seekers intent on sampling the varied attractions of Portsmouth Square, the Rialto of the city. On the threshold, shadowy, saturnine, neither of one world nor the other and in his splendid youth a trifle contemptuous of both, lounged Kid Orange.

Three weeks of enforced idleness irked the Kid's impetuous soul. He had come

to San Francisco that fall to purchase additional machinery for his mine in Mexico. But the war-cloud had interfered. Underneath the hectic gaiety lurked black depression, a looming threat of murderous fraternal strife. No supplies were coming from the East. Despite the weeks of waiting, he was as far as ever from a promised shipment.

"Sacramento!" he suddenly exploded. "Damn all autocratic governments, anyway! Why don't they fight—or kiss and get it over with?" And because he was nineteen, as well as Kentuckian, he added: "It would be good hunting if the South *did* secede. Then we might have some fun."

Shrugging, he left his doorway and stepped across the narrow street into the brilliant calcium-lit portals of the Rossiter Café. Discontent, fortunately, could not destroy a healthy appetite. He might profitably wile away at least an hour or so by catering to the inner man.

Like most eating houses of the period, the Rossiter was a combination music-hall and restaurant. A long and gleaming bar occupied a full half the place; then tables, among which circled painted, vivacious dancing-girls, and crowded against the right-hand wall a row of thin pine booths, which furnished more soberminded patrons some manner of seclusion, though no protection from the jangling melody of a sweating negro orchestra up on a stage at the far end of the hall.

It was a popular drinking-hour; all hours were, from darkness until dawn. The bar was crowded with a variety of pioneer society.

To drag the empty ceremony of dinner out as long as possible, the Kid shouldered his way between two boisterous groups and called for a potent, amber-colored appetizer.

IDLY twisting the glass in his fingers, he thereupon lapsed into a frowning abstraction, oblivious to the general uproar, oblivious even to the loud-voiced wrangle of two sturdy, well-dressed gentlemen immediately beside him—until a strong fist smote the bar so violently the glasses jumped.

"Demmit!" exclaimed the owner of the fist, thrusting a flushed face savagely close to that of his companion. "Don't remain ever an obstinate idiot, Carleton! You're spewing nonsense."

"Oh, no, I'm not," returned a lower but unequivocal tone. "It's the hand of destiny. Our Congressmen are for it. The legislature is for it. And the governor—well even you can no longer question his position."

"But I do, Andy! I do!" stormed the big man. "What's more, I say you lie if you assert that Governor Weller will openly espouse secession!"

"What?" The smaller of the pair was flushing also now. "Secession, did you say? Idiot yourself, then! We're years past that! It's not a question of secession, but the new republic. The governor has flung his gauntlet at the North! Hang it, Carleton, I credited you with human intelligence. Don't you read the daily papers?"

"Papers be damned—and you, too!" rasped the big man. "I'll take no more of your insolence."

"Oh, yes you will!" The other flourished a crumpled newspaper. In a voice ringing with passion and excitement he went on: "You'll hear what Governor Weller told the legislature yesterday. Yes—listen, damn you! '. . . *If the wild spirit of fanaticism which now pervades the land should destroy the magnificent confederacy—which God forbid!—California will not go with South or North, but here upon the shores of the Pacific found a mighty republic, which may in the end prove greatest of all!*' . . . Hah! What do you think of that?"

"It's dirty treason!" flamed the big man. "And only a sniveling blackguard would repeat it!"

A shrill curse. The smaller man's arm flicked out. A fist spat like a whiplash against a scowling face.

The big man grunted and threw himself forward. His brawny arms engulfed the other in a crushing hug. A split-second and their bodies were writhing, swaying back and forth across the bar, hurtling glasses and bottles to clattering destruction.

The brawl gained an appreciative interest. The space about the struggling, cursing fighters was discreetly cleared. No move was made to separate them—it was a

liberal place and age—save by two white-aproned barkeeps who galloped round the bar and lumbered to the rescue of their threatened furnishings.

Eyes dancing, the Kid swerved lightly into their path.

"Keep back!" he admonished with soft finality. "Would you thwart two worthy gentlemen in an effort to establish a friendly understanding?"

The little man had broken the bear-like hug of his opponent with a desperate wrench, and evading a storm of trip-hammer blows, danced in an agile circle about his burly adversary, sending in stinging right and left-landed jabs to face and chin.

Red, swelling welts showed on the big man's face. Blood streamed from a gash over one eye, half-blinding him. He howled with pain and futile anger, wasting his strength in maddened plunges the other easily eluded. Dodging, bending, jabbing, he followed up his advantage.

The heavier man was backed against the bar, a helpless chopping-block. There, abruptly, his hand dropped to his belt and rose again. A long knife caught the gleam of the flickering lamp-light.

The little man recoiled in horror, tripped over a chair, and fell sprawling in the sawdust. Cursing virulently, the other sprang to clear the space between them, knife raised for a despatching blow.

Before he gained a yard, Kid Orange had snatched the broad sombrero from his head and flung it. The murderous knife clattered to the floor. The big man, onrush suddenly checked, stood blinking in surprise.

"Quick, my friend!" the Kid urged his prostrate antagonist. "Up, before he lands on you!"

But the little man, clutching at his ankle in agony, could not rise.

A bellow of triumph. His enemy grasped the situation, scrambled wildly for the knife, recovered it, and again leaped forward.

"Houn' dog!" coldly averred the Kid.

A gun materialized like lightning in his hand. He fired from the hip, almost casually.

A second time the long knife clattered to the floor; but this time the would-be murderer did not stand blinking. He sank moaning down beside it, clutching a mutilated wrist. The fight was over.

The Kid sauntered forward and lifted the little man easily to his feet.

"You have the proper sentiment—in politics, compadre," he whispered softly. "Nevertheless, you're sadly lackin' in direction. Next time don't be so doggone loud in voicing your opinions."

He gave the man in keeping to a wide-eyed friend and then, indifferent alike to the moans still rising from his crippled adversary and a multitude of curious stares, passed leisurely into a wooden eating-booth, where he promptly lost himself in study of a soiled menu. The "appetizer" had been decidedly enjoyable.

II

"PARDON me, young man."

The Kid composedly finished a mouthful of steak, eased it down with a copious swig of water, wiped his mouth gracefully on his napkin and looked up—into a pair of cool black eyes, whose tall, distinguished owner stood in the doorway of the booth, pleasantly smiling down at him.

"I noticed your—ah—obvious interest in the words of our governor," he continued evenly, "not to mention your commendable activities in behalf of the hapless fool who—ah—broadcast them. Hence I could not forego this opportunity of makin' your acquaintance. I am Charles Southworth."

"And Southern by the speech of you." The name struck the Kid as dimly familiar. He rose and bowed courteously. "I am called Kid Orange, suh."

"The lad who started the gold stampede for Mexico?" Quick interest showed in the other's face. "About whom all California's weavin' such blood-curdling yarns?"

"I suppose so."

"That's doubly fortunate!" Southworth thrust out his hand. "Why, boy, I know your daddy well! My brother Alfred is his next-door neighbor."

"Of course!" cried the Kid. "Now I remember. An' you, suh, are the justly celebrated lawyer. Well met! I'll be honored to have you dine with me."

"Thank you. I've dined. However, I'll sit down and chat awhile, since—" he low-

ered himself to a bench, placed his top-hat carefully beside him, and leaned intently forward, "—of all the men in San Francisco, you are the one I most wished to find."

"Flattered, I'm sure, though somewhat mystified," returned the Kid lightly. "Why do you—"

"All in good time," interrupted the attorney; and in a lower tone: "Don't take it amiss if I ask a few questions. First of all; what are you doing here?"

"Trying to buy some mine equipment. But this damned war-talk—"

"Ah! In what light do you regard Lincoln's attitude toward the South?"

"He's an autocrat!" exclaimed the Kid impetuously.

Southworth smiled to himself, as if well satisfied.

"The authority of the federal government is already paralyzed in most of the slave states," he thoughtfully stated. "But the matter of supreme moment, not yet generally understood, is the critical importance of California. If this isolated state on the Pacific joins the Confederacy, it will profoundly complicate the problems of war. With the city of San Francisco in Southern hands, for instance, the outward flow of gold, on which the Union cause in large measure depends, will stop as a stream of water is cut off by a twist of the faucet. It is the easiest thing in the world to open and maintain connection through Arizona into Texas. No, it does not require a military expert to explain what a vital advantage to our—to the South would prove the control of the Pacific."

The Kid's glittering eyes betrayed his excitement.

"Ye!" he exclaimed. "But I'm afraid it's a hopeless dream. We're far removed from the storm center. The bulk of our population is neutral. It favors neither North nor South."

"Ah! Then I *was* correct!" ejaculated Southworth. "You agree with our governor?"

"I do!" said the Kid. "A western empire—man, that's a glorious dream!"

"And you'd pledge your aid—your utmost loyalty—to such a cause?" asked the attorney eagerly. "You'd work for a new republic—the Pacific Republic?"

"Yes, by God!" cried the Kid. "I'd spend my last dollar, my life if need be, to fight for that!"

"I'm proud to shake your hand!" declared Southworth, and did so heartily. "We sensed your steel, young man. That is why I was so anxious to get in touch with you." He scribbled a few quick words on a corner of the menu. "No more here; but in an hour—at ten o'clock—come to this address. You'll meet some interesting and congenial friends."

He bowed and disappeared.

PROMPTLY at the appointed hour the Kid, highly intrigued, approached a rambling mansion that he identified as the home of a well-known Southern sympathizer. Though situated in a fashionable district, it stood somewhat apart from other buildings and had entrances in several directions.

The owner dwelt alone. His Asiatic servants understood little English and cared not at all for what might be going on.

A soft-footed Chinese opened the door and took the Kid's card. Presently he was ushered into a large room in which a number of tastefully garbed gentlemen were seated about a long table. Most of them were young, their faces strange to him. He did, however, recognize Charles Southworth, his recent guest, and other leaders in various walks of San Francisco life.

They had apparently been awaiting him.

"Sit down, sir," impressively directed the spokesman—a figure of history who must remain known to us only as "General." Drawn to full height, there at the head of the table, he keenly scrutinized the newcomer. "You have been vouched for in the highest terms. We trust you. As evidence of that trust you have been chosen one of us—to lead in an affair of great peril, an enterprise on which the future of the South may depend. It sums itself simply to this; are you willing to risk life and fortune on the turn?"

"I am!"

"Gentlemen." The General swung solemnly toward the others. "Is there any objection to my giving him the oath? Very well. Rise, sir. Do you, in the presence of Almighty God, swear that what you may this night see or hear will be kept secret and sacred, and that you will not

by hint, action or word reveal the same to any living being?"

"I do!"

"Then may the Lord bless and have mercy on you, young patriot!" cried the General sonorously. "You have become a Knight of the Golden Circle—a member of the Society of Thirty—pledged to carry California out of the Union!"

The Kid took his place at the table with his peers, and during the next hour gathered two earfuls of astounding information.

The government at Washington had been too remote to give much thought to sparsely populated California. Federal garrisons were little more than a shadow—some two hundred troops at Fort Point; less than a hundred on that dreary, rock-bound isle of Alcatraz in San Francisco bay; a mere handful at Mare Island, and even less guarding the 30,000 stands of arms in Benecia arsenal. Points of strategic value were few, all centering near the city. Ambushed within striking distance of each point lay companies of reckless adventurers pledged to the Society, for each of the twenty-nine Knights had armed and equipped a band of one hundred fighters.

So far had the conspirators progressed in their designs, it remained only to set a date for the storming of San Francisco. That final detail was even now under consideration.

"Dare we proceed until we know the attitude of the Presidio?" asked a lank, cadaverous Knight, after some discussion. "To have the Union hornets snarling at our throats would be disastrous."

"A pertinent question!" rumbled the General.

"Pertinent, yes—but easy of solution!" A dark young man rose from his seat at a far end of the table.

"Edmond Randolph!" nodded the spokesman. "We'll hear from you."

"Dissipate your fears!" came Randolph's clear, vibrant voice. "Everything favors us. In the city, customs house, post office, mint, the Marshal's office—all, as you know, are in control of our friends. As for the hill—give me but a few more days and I will guarantee co-operation of—General Albert Sidney Johnston!"

His bold announcement produced a burst of wild applause. Johnston had been their gravest fear. The close intimacy existing between this member of the famous Randolph family of Virginia, man of rare legal talents and personal charm, and the commander of the Department of the Pacific, however, was well known.

"Would it not be policy to have some local favorite, preferably some public officer, lead the rebellion of the city itself?" suggested someone when quiet had been renewed.

"Most certainly!" agreed the General. "I have the very man in mind. He is Charles Doane, marshal of the Vigilantes of '56—and of unquestionable Southern sympathies. Do you all favor him?"

"Aye!" they cried. And then: "Now name the day! Name the day and make it soon!"

"This is the fifteenth of December," mused the General. "We must give Randolph time, must give time also for our new member to recruit his fighting-men. Well, a month should be sufficient. What say you to February first?"

The date was avidly seized upon for revolution.

III

KID ORANGE left the meeting in a fury of zealous determination. The aura of mystery, the melodrama, the dark cabals of the society appealed to his adventurous young soul almost as much as its astounding purpose—to hew out of the dissenting American Commonwealth a new and mightier nation. No matter what the outcome of the Eastern war he would go down to history as an empire builder; he would have done his share in building up another, greater South! It was an object eminently adapted to his years and dynamic personality.

To Southworth, who accompanied him back to his hotel, the Kid poured out something of his new-found enthusiasm. The attorney, with a commending but grave nod, replied:

"Ah, yes! And yet I wonder if any of us realize the appalling consequence, the far-reaching significance of what we are about to undertake."

"Hello!" cried the Kid. "Do you waver?"

"No, no," returned Southworth slowly. "I merely look into the future. But—pshaw! It is unwise. Better simply to let

emotion carry us at a time like this than pause to weigh and wonder. Man is too infinitesimal to consort with the fates. Perhaps that's why he is not given to see." He shook his head as though to clear it of troublesome doubt. "And now, my friend, how do you propose to go about your task?"

"What task?"

"The highly important one of recruiting and equipping a hundred men."

"That's easy enough," returned the Kid carelessly. "The state abounds with soldiers of fortune, ex-veterans of the Mexican war, ex-filibusters, ex-Indian fighters, ex-the Lord knows what else, all eager to sell themselves to any standard extending hope of action—and profit. I dare say that even in San Francisco, thanks to the quaint reports of my Mexican adventures—"

"Yes! Kid Orange is a name to conjure with," cut in the attorney frowning, "and I dare say that on the pretext of leading them to your fabulous mine you could recruit a thousand. But how foolhardly! Instead of secrecy, San Francisco would fairly ring with it. You could not lift a finger, move a man without becoming the center of all eyes.

"That's so," admitted the Kid. "Then how about San Jose, or the Sacramento valley."

"Too late," said Southworth. "Jennings has scraped the valley with a fine-tooth comb, while Barnett's band is stationed near San Jose. Lad, it takes some planning to dispose twenty-nine hundred men within a radius of thirty miles. They surround the city. And for your band to concentrate near any other would rouse suspicion."

"Well—where the dickens *am* I to go?" demanded the Kid.

"It's a problem." Southworth thought for a moment. "Ah! Marin County is still fertile soil. Santa Rosa—San Rafael—they're only a short boat-ride down the bay. A practicable and innocent headquarters!"

"I don't know a doggone soul at Santa Rosa."

"The place is infested with bandits, cutthroats, thieves—a godless riffraff well suited to our needs."

"No doubt. But how the devil am I to tell an efficient cutthroat from an incompetent?" asked the Kid caustically. "They're all one ugly physiognomy."

"I'll solve that difficulty," smiled Southworth. "Idle here at the bar for half an hour longer. Before that time a certain Juan Peterman will make his presence known. Juan is a trusted agent. I do not mean his antecedents or his morals are beyond reproach. Far from it! He is a shrimper, badger, blackleg, and various other savory things. But he can be trusted to know every gallows-bird in sovereign California. His knowledge has proved of use to us before. Pay him well—and watch him better!" He chuckled and made off.

PRESENTLY there slid into the all but deserted taproom of the Palace and sidled toward the Kid a small, sleek individual whom he at once identified as a "white" Mexican. The man was dapperly enough clad in his velvet jacket and brilliant red sash—a startling contrast to the lifeless pallor of his face—but a cruel nose and thin, bloodless lips plainly bespoke the wolf.

"Señor Orange?" he inquired in a sibilant purr.

"Waugh!" thought the Kid as the glinting, coal-black eyes slid from his own to fasten on the wall. "An admirable citizen, certainly!" And aloud: "Correct. You are Juan Peterman, the—ah—trusted agent of whom my friend spoke?"

"Si," replied the breed, lips curling into some semblance of a smile. "I am Juan—loyal unto death. Señor Southworth has good reason to know it."

Whose death, wondered the Kid. But he only said: "I must seek a hundred bold men in Marin County. Character is immaterial so long as they know how to handle guns and have the courage to use them. More, I do not care to say."

"More you do not need to say," returned Juan, lips still writhing. "It will take a little time, perhaps—but we will find them, you and I. What is to be my pay?"

"Twenty dollars a day, if you prove worth it. Otherwise a hiding."

"The threat is—not politic, Señor!" The breed's eyes narrowed. Then he shrugged. "Of course it is that you are ignorant of my ways. When do you wish to start?"

"Tomorrow noon. I'll meet you here."

"Buenos, Señor. Goodnight and pleasant dreams."

Juan swung his sombrero in a half-taunting farewell bow.

In his careless, self-confidence the next day the Kid did an exceedingly unwise thing, and did not realize it until too late.

A goodly supply of money was necessary to his plans. Passing the Wells-Fargo offices on their way to the ferry he said to Juan: "Wait for me here," and stepped inside to the cashier's window.

It was only when he turned, a heavy bag of gold in his hand, seeking for some secluded corner in which to transfer it to his money-belt, that he caught sight of the breed's glowing eyes intently fixed on him through the office window. Their expression was enlightening.

"Ohé! Only a fool would deliberately throw temptation in his path like that!" the Kid rebuked himself. "I am undoubtedly assuring myself a pleasant journey."

They boarded the ferry, changed to horses at Santa Rosa, and by nightfall had reached the little inland community of Petaluma.

There was no denying Juan's influence with certain elements of society. An hour after dinner he had assembled for the Kid's inspection in a neighboring dive a collection of five as burly, ragged, evil-faced and bepistoled blackguards as one would care to see.

"Excellent!" laughed the Kid. "But does all Petaluma afford no greater extent of villainy than this?"

"Have patience, Señor!" expostulated the breed. "Men with the qualifications you seek do not grow on bushes. Tomorrow is another day."

Tomorrow was another day, and the Kid took due precaution that he would see it. There was little protection in the shaky lock of his hotel door. He dragged a rickety washstand in front of it, propped the wash-bowl over the knob so that the slightest movement would dislodge it, and went complacently to sleep, gun underneath his pillow.

Some time later a terrifying crash awakened him—hard-followed by a muffled curse and the scurry of rapidly retreating feet.

"Doggone! I hope I haven't cheated justice by scarin' him to death!" observed the Kid. Wherewith he turned over and went cheerfully to sleep again, certain that for the one night at least the amiable Juan's activities were over.

It became evident that the breed's assertion had been quite correct; daring adventurers, even of the none too exclusive type required by the Kid did not grow on bushes. After two weeks of cautious scouting through the countryside, in fact, and despite Juan's peculiar genius for attracting scum, they lacked some forty recruits of their hundred.

The half-breed had made no further attempt at robbery. He was beginning to gage the measure of his patron's shrewdness. Nevertheless, the Kid knew that treachery lurked behind those glinting eyes; knew and mocked, until the eyes blazed with baleful venom.

They found themselves back again at Santa Rosa.

"Juan Peterman," began the Kid the second afternoon following their arrival: "this pretty town's notorious for its badmen, yet in two days you've found me exactly that same number. You're playin' me, you black-hearted devil. I've a mind to spank you!" And the grimness of his tone belied the innocence of the words.

"Señor," whined the breed. "It is true that there are many fine birds in Santa Rosa. Yet are they all of one feather. And over them rules with biting claw the very king of the air—an eagle, Señor—Don Juan Garcia!"

"Ah, Don Garcia—his mark!" scoffed the Kid. "A namesake of yours, it appears. Any relation?"

"Is the chicken related to the chicken-hawk?" asked Juan sententiously.

"Poor chickie! But go on. What of this Don Garcia?"

"Santa Maria! He is too big a prey for your net!"

"I'll be damned if he is!" cried the Kid. "I can promise him such plunder as no country village affords. If his gang is as large and desperate as you pretend, our weary search is over. Go get him."

Juan's pale face remained expressionless, but his eyes became twin pinpoints of gleaming light.

"He does not come; when one wishes Don Garcia, one goes to him," he purred. And, as the Kid raised a commanding hand: "Buenos! Since you insist, I go

—to advise Don Garcia of his honor."

Three hours later he returned.

"At ten o'clock tonight, Don Garcia bids me say, he will confer with you at his *hacienda* a few miles south of here. Do not go, Señor. It is a perilous venture. I beg of you, do not go!" The veiled insolence in his tone made of the words a challenge.

"Why the dickens not?"

"Don Garcia does not like Americanos," explained the breed with calculated solicitude. "It is not safe."

"Go to the devil!" snapped the Kid. "Or better yet, we'll both go. I'll take you with me."

IV

DON GARCIA'S *hacienda* was a cavernous, isolated roadhouse. No light filtered through the heavy shutters as they pulled their sweating horses to a halt beside the door. Only a creaking, weather-beaten sign bearing the faded letters, PARADISE, revealed what presumed to be the nature of the place.

From a low, rambling outhouse crowded up against it came an occasional whinny, and the steady champ of feet.

"Hum! Plenty of cattle," remarked the Kid. "Although Don Garcia seems to lack a stable-boy.

"I myself will stable the horses, Señor," offered Juan, dismounting.

"Not so." The Kid peered into the darkness. "We won't bother to unsaddle. Let's tie up in the corral, yonder." He lowered a bar. They led their animals into the deserted corral, haltered them in a corner invisible from the house, and turned back up the steps under the creaking sign.

Juan drummed a staccato summons on the nail-studded door. An instant and it was flung abruptly open, a stream of misty yellow light flooding their faces.

"What ho! So this is Paradise!" grinned the Kid.

In garish contrast with the desolation of the inn's exterior was the room before them. Lacking only the short-skirted dancing girls, it was a typical frontier saloon. A long bar held the place of honor. At tables scattered over the floor games of faro, monte and poker were in progress; the players, an unkempt but ferocious-looking crew of white outlaws, Mexicans and breeds. Encircling the room overhead ran a smoke-stained wooden balcony.

Heads turned, and bloodshot eyes leered at the Kid, but the hoarse muttering of the brigands among themselves—in a weird medley of jarring tongues—did not diminish. It was almost as though they had been warned how to conduct themselves at his coming, so little was the heed paid this bland young stranger.

"Don Garcia will not arrive for some little time," reported Juan after an exchange of whispers with a jet-haired Mexican. "He has left word for us to partake freely of his hospitality."

He slid toward the bar. *"Mas vino,"* he ordered with a peremptory wave.

"Si, Señor," quavered a gentle voice.

"Now what the devil!" exclaimed the Kid, staring. The barkeep was a dusky girl, scarcely more than a child, whose wistful olive face struck a strangely incongruous note in that savage den. "A little lady. Hi! Señorita—what are you doing in this Paradise?"

She glanced fearfully about her, shook her head as though to deny a knowledge of English, and shrank away. By the scowls on either side of him the Kid deduced further questions would not be diplomatic.

"Score one against that big, brave Don of yours, so far as I'm concerned," he nevertheless grumbled to Juan. "It strikes me he's a cradle-robber."

Juan shrugged. "She is his daughter," he averred. "Or so they say."

They dawdled for a lengthy interval over their wine. Don Garcia, it appeared, was in no hurry to return.

Bored and restless, at length, the Kid flung away from the bar to watch the play at a faro table. And again, though he stood looking directly over the shoulders of the players at their cards, no heed was paid him.

The Mexican bandit did not stint his men in liquor. The little waitress darted ever back and forth bearing mugs of whiskey and mescal. As the fluids disappeared the ribald uproar bid fair to develop into a drunken riot.

A MAUDLIN turmoil eddied about the bar. Frenziedly swift as she was, there came a time when the child cupbearer could no longer keep abreast of

the increasing demands for more liquor.

To the Kid, absorbed before the gaming table, drifted at length a muffled scream of terror.

He swerved. Three lithe bounds and he had cleared a way to where a dark vaquero reeled across the bar, dirty hands clutching a tender throat.

"Stop a moment, *hombre!*"

The Kid's wiry fingers closed over a ragged collar. Other fingers bit into an extended wrist. A sudden heave and the Mexican's body hurtled back, carrying one of his leering comrades with it to the floor.

The Kid set his back against the bar, watchful, arms hanging loosely from the elbows, ready for instant reprisal. Much to his secret astonishment, none came. There was a din of angry snarls—but even the foaming Mexican was dragged away before he could regain his feet. The space about the Kid remained clear.

From behind him, as he stood marveling, came a gasping whisper: "Save yourself, Señor, in the name of God! Oh, *amigo mio!* You are about to die!"

"Why?"

"Where is that cur Juan?" She poured a desperate flood of words into his ear. "You do not see him, eh? I tell you why! He has sold your life to Don Garcia and fled. It is your gold they seek. For that you were brought here, and these jackals dare not harm you—unless you try to leave. Garcia saves you for himself. Soon he appears. He strikes. Dios! You die the instant you touch your gun."

It was a tight pinch, a time for fast, decisive thinking. To attempt to fight his way through that dense horde and win the door was folly. Folly also to stay. He would be attacked, tormented into reaching for his gun, his only means of protection—now changed to sudden death. Ironic, that! Worse yet, he had no means of knowing in what form the attack was to come.

HE might have saved himself worry on that score. During the instant of his deliberation there emerged from an inside room and strode directly toward him a hawk-nosed, bearded giant of a man.

He wasted no time in preliminaries, did Don Garcia. His enormous, bulging shoulder jostled the Kid and sent him reeling.

There is in football and other sports something generally referred to as instinct. It is not reason. It is a form of genius—the inexplicable ability of a master athlete to anticipate the play, to forestall and thus frustrate the strategy of the opposition.

Kid Orange had matured no plan. And yet now at time of need, he swept to execute one.

His fist crashed to the point of Don Garcia's chin with all the weight of a lean, hard body behind it. The bandit saved himself from falling by clutching wildly at a table.

Even while he swayed, the Kid had bounded lightly atop the bar, then flung himself desperately high in air up toward the overhanging balcony.

A searching hand touched and gripped the lower rail. With a lifting twist the Kid was over, gun out, grinning and panting at the faces that gaped up at him.

Blank amazement held the bandits for an instant motionless. The unexpected had congealed their sluggish brains. Then a breed, in a far corner, cursed viciously. His hand slid toward his sash.

The Kid's gun spat. The man's legs crumpled under him. He sagged face downward to the floor.

"Don Garcia!" The Kid's gun muzzle circled toward the bearded leader. His voice rang with confidence and exultation. "Know you who I am?"

"A devil from hell!" came Don Garcia's fearless roar.

"Perhaps," laughed the Kid. "But on this earth I'm called Kid Orange—of Kaintuck!"

The name just then a byword farther south had echoed even to them, it seemed. There was an outbreak of exclamations and surprised sputtering over which rose the bellow of Don Garcia:

"*Dios!* I did not know that I was setting squirrel-traps for a yellow fox!"

"You know it now," replied the Kid. "Know also that when I count to three an eagle screams and dies—and after him a few choice carrion-birds!"

Another howl, but this time it was loud and helpless anguish.

"Unless—" went on the Kid with malicious deliberation—"unless you wish to an-

swer for your rabble in a certain choice. . . ."

"In God's name state that choice!"

"Well, then—to put it briefly, there is a certain matter for which I need a hundred men. Sixty I have. Forty I lack, and one good captain. Do you care to supply that lack, Don Garcia, and trail with Kid Orange—or stay, most permanently dead, without him?"

"Señor Orange," boomed the huge bandit earnestly. "That is no choice—to serve a golden son of fortune, a modern Midas whose touch turns every rock to virgin ore. It is an opportunity which—"

"My Aunt!" broke in the Kid. "I scotched a snake and found a poet!"

"—comes but once in a lifetime. Only turn that yawning gun the other way. It worries me!"

"Buenos!" The Kid thrust his weapon back in its holster, and swung chuckling to a seat on the balcony rail. "Now, Carmencita, darlin', serve another round of drinks. Or no! Let Don Garcia do it. They're on him, anyway!"

V

THE General was seriously perturbed. Deep lines bit into his finely chiseled face. It had grown old and haggard almost overnight.

He called the roll. There was a break among the answering ayes; Edmond Randolph was missing. His absence cast a pall of uneasy gloom. There were low questions, furtive mutterings.

"Gentlemen, we are at a vital crisis," began the General. Though he held himself proudly erect, his voice quavered. "Disaster stalks us. I have called you to decide whether it would not be best completely to abandon our—" he forced the words "—our glorious undertaking."

The society sat for a moment in stunned silence. Then from several of the Knights broke anxiously: "General! We don't understand. What's wrong?"

"I—I fear that Edmond Randolph has gone mad!" cried the General miserably. "I despatched one of our number to confirm it. He has come back with an appalling tale. He has returned to say—to say—"

Kid Orange leaped to his feet. "To say that Randolph is a traitor!" he concluded. "I located him yesterday at a drinking club, flushed, hysterical, deep in talk with James McClatchy—that damned abolitionist friend of Edward Baker, who is so close to Lincoln. Unobserved I later followed the pair to McClatchy's offices. No sooner had I set foot across the threshold of the anteroom than again I heard our loyal comrade's voice, raised in a passionate outcry.

"Compadres, I tell you Randolph is a traitor! With no thought for his sacred oath, at the top of his foul lungs he shrieked: *'War is inevitable! And only Union fools would place reliance on the federal garrisons. Albert Sidney Johnston is at heart a traitor, and will give the Southerners every opportunity to take the state. Three thousand men—three thousand men, I say!—stand ready to take up arms in favor of a Pacific Republic!'*

"My hand was on the doorknob before I saw the folly of dropping the coyote in his tracks. But then I checked myself, and rushed to bring this pleasant news."

An ominous silence fell, broken only by the rustle of paper in the General's trembling hands.

"A damning letter is already on its way to Washington. No doubt of that," he apathetically announced. "Nor is Randolph's blow the only one to weaken us. Today at Stockton the flag of our republic was prematurely displayed. Some idiotic sailing master ran it to the masthead of his vessel lying in the slough. With its huge grizzly and lone star, no one could miss its import. My friends, the wolves of ruin are snapping at our throats. What shall we do?"

"Do?" shouted the Kid, again on his feet in reckless fury. "Do? Why, damn all traitors and fight it through despite them! It will take two weeks for McClatchy's message to reach the telegraph at St. Joe, so Washington is helpless. But we must strike before McClatchy and that treacherous viper spread their knowledge here. And we can do it! Our organization is complete, our men ring San Francisco. Johnston is with us; Randolph's words prove that. By God, amigos, let us strike at once! Tomorrow!"

His hot audacity, his impetuousness spread like wildfire among the mercurial Southerners. Their answer was a fierce

assenting roar that shook the room.

The General urged deliberation, urged caution, but they swept him on.

"Tomorrow!" they stormed insistently. "Tomorrow seize the city!"

Himself imbued with some measure of that turbulent recklessness the General at the last agreed:

"So be it, gentlemen. You are the final judges. We will risk everything on one comprehensive stroke—tomorrow. Let the companies begin their march at eight o'clock. They are to reach the city on the dot of two. Randolph failed to pass the word to Sheriff Doane, selected as leader here. I'll see him personally. We will hold a last counsel just before the arrival of our troops. Come to my office. There is no need for further secrecy. Until then —God keep you, gentlemen, and good-night!"

THE morning of January seventeenth broke clear and sunny. At seven-thirty o'clock the General, discarding pretense, called on Sheriff Doane.

Charles Doane was a man of heroic proportions. Calm, regular features completely veiled his emotions, as those who had played poker with him well could testify. He heard the General through without the slightest change of expression, without the least hint of approval or disapproval. Then he quietly said:

"I am sheriff of San Francisco."

"Yes. And therefore. . . ."

"I cannot discuss the matter further."

"But I have placed my cards openly on the table!" protested the General. "We must know where you stand!"

The sheriff's broad face crinkled in a smile, wherein the astute General read a world of promise.

"Don't rush me, *hombre,*" drawled Doane amiably. "Actions speak louder than words, you know. I reached a decision long ago. I'll attempt to show you where I stand." And with that the general was forced to content himself.

A half-hour after the door had closed behind him Doane was closeted with Colonel Stevenson, commander of the militia. Presently to the conference came lovable, fearless young Dave Scannell, the newly appointed fire chief.

As the morning hours wore on there began a mysterious, agitated rushing to and fro throughout the city.

Shortly before two o'clock the colonel from a window overlooking the plaza saw Scannell, mounted on his famous gray stallion, trot blithely westward at the head of a small but efficient looking column of well-armed firemen.

There was only one place where a considerable body of men could safely hide while waiting to assault the city from the west: the heavy brush on Telegraph Hill. Thence, up the steep cobbles of Broadway, labored the column.

VI

SPRAWLING at ease beneath the trees that sprinkled the hill-crest, a band of sturdy blackguards filled the air with smoke and lurid badinage. They were far from the maddening crowd, safely hidden from the most piercing city eye. In due time they would execute an appointed task with merciless, expert relish. Meanwhile it was good to relax under the balmy sun, dull care and warlike accoutrements tossed aside.

Don Garcia, gigantic, bearded, slumped somnolently on a rounded boulder. To and fro beside him paced the slender Kid. He alone was restless, cursing under his breath. He had been given the post of honor. His band was to head the attack. But the signal was past due, and waiting always galled him.

"Sacramento!" he growled at last, squinting down into the city. "Why don't the fools get going! The doggone—"

"Idiots!" supplemented a gay voice.

The Kid whirled. One hand parting the bushes, the other leveling a heavy pistol. Scannell stood quizzically eyeing him. "Keep those nervous paws in front of you, my lad!" he added coldly.

Instantly the Kid flung sideways, reaching for his gun.

Scannell's pistol cracked. The Kid's arm fell limply to his side. But even as it fell he was in mid-air, hurtling at the fire chief.

So fiercely unexpected was the leap, Scannell had no chance to swerve. Once more he shot, almost by instinct—at Don Garcia, rearing over him from the other side. Coughing blood, the bearded giant collapsed.

At that instant the Kid's shoulder struck squarely home. The pistol clattered from the fire chief's hand as he fell sprawling.

When he had struggled to his feet and regained his weapon Kid Orange was twenty yards away, bounding down the perilous slope of Telegraph with the abandoned fury of a mountain goat.

So rapidly had occurred the incident, the Kid's men were still scrambling frenziedly for their arms. Came a widespread crackling of the underbrush, and to them floated Scannell's cold, thin voice again:

"Look before you leap, compadres!"

They looked—into a veritable bristle of rifle mouths, and stopped aghast.

"Most wise!" affirmed Scannell. "Now, all hands overhead, I beg of you! Much obliged. *Hola,* firemen! Stop me that human antelope yonder!"

A ragged volley echoed from the hilltop. Dust spurted from a dozen points near the Kid. He dashed unheeding on, to catapult at last behind a projecting shoulder of the hill—and safety.

"Bravo!" cried Scannell. "A fearless lad. I'm glad he made it! Well, close in, gentlemen, close in! How many genial cutthroats have we here? A hundred, I'll be bound! All present and accounted for? Good! Oh, Charley Seaton! Take five men and gather up their job lot of artillery."

In such wise, and in a moment, was fought the fateful battle up on Telegraph.

THE first members of the society to reach the General's office were gay with their impending victory. It was an immeasurable relief to throw off the mask of furtiveness and stand squarely in the light of day. The thought of independence, of unlimited power so nearly in their grasp exhilarated and enthralled them.

"What news?" demanded one, eagerly. "Is the sheriff with us?"

"If I am any judge of human nature and Southern spirit, he is!" returned the General blandly. "He would not commit himself in words. He said he'd rather show me."

"Excellent!" nodded the General. "There has been no hitch. It is understood, then, that once we have taken San Francisco, once we are in possession of the militia arsenal here, the others strike? Our strongest factor is surprise. Without it—"

Southworth flung panting into the room.

"The plan's out!" he shouted. "Somebody's warned the Unionists! The gates of the militia armory are barred! Armed volunteers guard every loophole.

"Impossible!" cried the General. For an instant the meeting was demoralized, everyone babbling at cross-purposes. Before order could be restored Kid Orange — bloody, grimy, disheveled — plunged madly through the door.

"Hell's poppin', gentlemen!" he gasped. "We've certainly been crossed for fair! Some damn flippant cuss, with all of two hundred troops, ambushed my fellows at North Beach and captured every living one —I guess. I didn't wait to see."

"There's a traitor in this room!" blazed Southworth. "I tell you, General, every Unionist in San Francisco is under arms!"

"No! No!" The General was very pale. He pressed a hand convulsively over his heart. "It—it was Charles Doane. I see it now! Comrades, I am the cause of this. I thought Doane was with us—and he tricked me!"

"Come on!" The Kid turned fiercely on the gathering. "We'll go down trying, anyway. Make for your companies, and give the dogs a battle!"

"No!" groaned the General. "That's futile! While we are fighting for the city the federal garrisons will take alarm. Our only chance was to win them by surprise. Gentlemen—for God's sake save yourselves while you have time!"

"What?" snorted the Kid in scornful indignation. "Run away? Not me! I've had a bellyful today! Why, we can beat 'em yet. We've all forgotten—General Johnston!"

Even the General glimpsed a ray of hope. With Johnston secretly favorable to the cause, he would at least remain passive, would not cast his forces into the scales against them. But they must gain his ear at once.

"Barrows! Kennedy! Burdette!" he snapped with something of his earlier determination. "Tell all companies to hold off pending further orders. Now—" as the trio bolted "—a committee of three to wait upon the general. Southworth, Tremaine—young Orange! Our fate rests in your hands!"

VII

THE committee crowded unceremoniously into the General's carriage and whipped the horses up Rincon Hill to the commander's home, which also served as his headquarters.

They were ushered without delay into a spacious library, where sat a tanned, broad-shouldered man with a mass of pure yellow hair untouched by age, although he was nearly sixty.

"General Johnston!" blurted Southworth; he was almost beside himself, his usual self-control entirely lacking. "We come to throw ourselves upon your mercy! Time will make or ruin us. Ah, surely you know our mission! You know that we—"

Quietly but resolutely Johnston flung up an arresting hand.

"You see my uniform," he said, deliberately spacing the words.

"Yes, General! And God knows I love you for your loyalty. But it's misplaced!" cried the attorney. "It's not due a government which will break faith with you! Have you not heard how Thursday, in Sacramento, Edmond Randolph denounced you to McClachy? He cursed you for a traitor—said you were but awaiting opportunity to surrender California to the South! That fatal utterance is already on its way to Lincoln. You are ruined!"

A spasm of overpowering grief twisted the general's fine, intellectual face. He bowed his head. When at last he raised it, it was not to the Southerners he spoke.

"Orderly! My secretary!"

A lieutenant entered the room.

"Take this letter, please," said Johnston. Another pause. The words that followed it tolled clear as fate. "*'His Excellency the President of the United States. . . . Dear Mr. President: A cruel reflection on my integrity makes it imperative for me to leave that service to which I have given the best years and the greatest devotion of my life. Herewith my resignation, which I beg you to make effective at once. May the Almighty Father strengthen you ever to do the right—as you are given to see it. . . . Most respectfully, . . . Albert Sidney Johnston, General Commanding the Department of the Pacific.'*"

On the last word the general rose and paced softly to the window, where he remained with bent head. The droop of his broad shoulders conveyed an unutterable depression.

Surprise, amazement and, most of all, incredulous delight swept Southworth and Tremaine.

"And now, suh!" Southworth cried exultantly, after a moment. "And now, suh, with nothing in the way—"

"Shut your mouth!" Eyes blazing, Kid Orange faced the other committee-men. "What dirty tricksters we three scoundrels are! By God! I'm glad I read myself before too late! A square fight, yes, by all means—but do you think I'll crawl to power by soiling the honor of a gentleman?"

He broke off in a wave of revulsion, a hand pressed over his eyes.

The general turned. There was no longer harrowing grief in his proud carriage or high-flung head; only an infinite gratitude and compassion.

"General!" The Kid flung out his arms in an appealing, unconsciously dramatic gesture. "Defend the property of the United States, the government whose uniform you wear, with every resource at your command—with your last drop of blood! We've played the game and lost it! I for one will take what's comin' standing up—and fair. Back in Kentucky we don't aim to win by urging another man to treachery!"

And with a broken sob he dashed incontinently from the room.

Save for those bandits trapped by Dave Scannell, no hostile force set foot in San Francisco.

In only one thing did the Knights succeed, due largely to the almost superhuman efforts of Kid Orange: they disbanded their forces without stay or punishment.

The Kid, for reasons of his own, remained in San Francisco, ardor temporarily curbed but no whit dampened.

"The war's not over yet!" he told the General somewhat jauntily when next they met. "And by the gods—I'm going to find a way to stem that stream of gold on which the North depends, or pass out trying!"

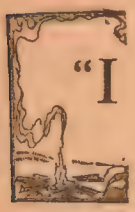
"Ah! I devoutly wish you luck!" sighed the careworn General.

The Boothill Buster

True life-story of Capt. Bill McDonald, top Texas Ranger.

"I'd charge hell with a bucket of water!" Such was the Ranger boast of Capt. Bill McDonald. Many a buscadero called that bluff, and died—for few could out-trigger the death-quick guns of the man who purged the Texas Badlands.

"No man in the wrong can stand against a fellow that's in the right, and keeps on acomin'."



"I'D charge hell with a bucket of water."

That was Captain Bill McDonald's fighting challenge to the outlaw denizens of the Texas Panhandle—the cattle rustlers and bandits who made a strip of Texas a No Man's Land and a barking forty-five its Supreme Court.

Every decent man admired the lanky old Captain of the Texas Rangers. Indeed, one of his staunchest friends was Colonel Roosevelt, whom he once accompanied on a wolf hunt.

Captain Bill was one of those picturesque characters of a decade ago, who helped to make American history in the great Southwest.

No one would have called him handsome, as his skin was tanned yellow, his eyes like gimlets, and he had the nose of a hawk.

His gaunt figure was usually clad in a long frock coat, with a cartridge belt around it.

Although he carried a pair of Colts in his holsters, he seldom used them, except when he wished to "talk" to a bad acting outlaw.

In speech he was gentle enough, but his manner was so quick and impulsive that a crony called him a "concentrated package of dynamite."

Born in Kemper County, Mississippi, near the Alabama line, he grew up a natural peacemaker until he became a Deputy Sheriff. Then he became a trouble maker for the lawless. Whenever a fight occurred, McDonald had a genius for being there, to disarm the combatants, and admonish them in a manner that few men could resist. When he found that his proper vocation was enforcement of the law, he became a terror to the bad men of his community.

But "Bill Jess," as they called him, needed more authority, and qualified as a Deputy U. S. Marshal in the southern district of Kansas.

As a boy he had hunted slaves in the swamps of the Mississippi. As a man he became the greatest outlaw hunter in the then "bad" country of Texas.

A great field had now opened up for Deputy Marshal McDonald, for Texas had become the stamping ground of the worst outlaws in the world. They filled the Panhandle. They swarmed in the Cherokee Strip. They made a hell of No Man's Land.

At that time the Texas Panhandle extended from parallels 100 to 103, east and west. No Man's Land lay on the north, Indian Territory on the east, and New Mexico on the west. It was an isolated, but very fertile tract of land. A tramp once said he had lost $100,000 there in one year by not having cattle to eat up the grass. And as a fact, the Panhandle afterward became a mighty domain of ranches as big as kingdoms. One, the X. I. T., covered a good portion of the northern part of the locality.

And this was the refuge for the hundreds of gamblers, cow thieves and desperadoes that Captain Bill had undertaken to drive out.

HE started the work of reclamation like a human whirlwind, and it was not long before he had the criminals on the run.

He was working in the Panhandle one day when he heard that a horse was stolen. Deputy Bill declared that he would get the thieves in twenty-four hours. He was so sure of it, that he borrowed a buckboard to bring them back. Learning that the gang was camped at Beaver Creek, he tackled them single handed. When he returned, three cursing outlaws lay handcuffed in the buckboard!

That's the sort of man Deputy Bill was. He was the man who went to Lipscomb County, smashed up a band of cow thieves and landed them in the Wichita Falls jail. He was the man who went to Oklahoma, and cleaned out the Sand Creek gang, when the Government troops couldn't do it. When he opened up on Cherokee Strip, he scattered the outlaws of Turkey Creek to the four winds of heaven.

As a marshal, Bill found his work restricted, so he joined the Texas Rangers as a special in Company B, commanded by Captain S. A. McMurray. His remarkable record of mopping up the Panhandle had been the talk of the whole State of Texas.

He finished his campaign in the Cherokee Strip, and started for Fort Worth. On the way, he learned that the Campbell boys were running amuck. These notorious desperadoes had planned to hold up a train, and were known to have been hiding in a thicket near the station at Burke.

Ranger Bill borrowed a horse, gripped his gun, and plunging into the bushes nabbed his men, despite the fact that one of them tried desperately to kill him.

A short time afterward Captain McMurray resigned from the Rangers. Bill heard of it, hastened to Austin, and applied to his former friend, Governor James Hogg, for the command.

He got it.

As Captain of the Texas Rangers, fearless Bill McDonald had a tough contract on his hands, for every lawless character in that region had sworn to get him at the first opportunity.

II

IT was strange, indeed, that McDonald did not "happen to get killed" in those busy days. One of the favorite vows of tough "panhandlers" was to shoot Bill McDonald on sight. But there was a suddenness and vigor about McDonald's manner and method that was very bad for a vow like that when the moment for its execution arrived. Still, there were those who tried to make good, and one of them came near being successful. He would have succeeded, no doubt, if he had had time.

THIS man's name was John Pierce Matthews, which became simply John Pierce after its owner had got the drop on a steamboat captain one day in Louisiana and shot him dead. He took the new name with him to the Panhandle, where in due time he got the drop on another man, somewhere up in the northern tier of counties, with the same result. This was a good while before he came down to Childress County and got to be sheriff, but there were those who had not forgotten, and among them was Captain Bill McDonald, then stopping at Wichita Falls. Matthews, or Pierce, as he was called, frequently came down to the Falls for a spree, and on one such visit made application to join a secret society. McDonald was a prominent member of that society and Matthews did not get in. This stirred the animosity of Matthews, and he began to clean his six-shooter daily and to practice sudden and accurate firing, which he knew would be necessary in case of a showdown.

By and by there was a sheriff's convention at Houston, and on a boat excursion between Houston and Galveston, Matthews spoke disrespectfully to Governor Hogg, who was on board. McDonald, who was also present, promptly called Matthews to account, and a general settlement might have been reached then and there had well-meaning but misguided friends of both parties not interfered, and spoiled a very pretty sheriff's-picnic newspaper story. As it was, Matthews kept on oiling his pistol and practicing, meantime enlisting the sympathy of friends, to whom he confided that some day when he had a little leisure he was going back to look up Bill McDonald and kill him, suggesting that they be present and take a hand.

Matthews also had another enemy, one Joe Beckham, sheriff of Motley County, an officer of his own kind, who

presently got as short as possible in his accounts, absconded and set out for Indian Territory. Matthews had no right to go outside of his own county after a fugitive, and no business in this matter, anyway, as he wanted Beckham only for a misdemeanor, whereas he was charged in his own county with felony. But Matthews had an itch for Beckham on his own account, so he picked up another enemy of Beckham, named Cook, a citizen of Motley, with an ambition for Beckham's office, and the two came with peaceful attitude and fair words to Quanah where Captain Bill was then stopping, requesting the loan of a Ranger to go over into the Territory after the defaulting officer.

McDonald refused, but said he would send a man as far as the Territory line—Ranger authority not extending beyond that border. He did send one Ranger, McClure, who being strongly persuaded, overstepped, at the same instant, his authority and the State line; captured Beckham, whom he lost through a writ of habeas corpus; fell into a plot devised by Matthews and Cook to get rid of him, and was finally brought back to Quanah by Captain Bill, who drove a hundred miles on a bad night to get him out of the mess; after which McClure was a wiser and better Ranger.

BECKHAM, meanwhile, had fallen a victime to remorse, or more likely had been promised immunity, and now hurried over to Quanah and gave himself up again to Ranger McClure, Captain Bill being absent from Quanah at the time. Beckham asked to be taken to Matador, county seat of Motley, for trial, and begged McClure to see him through Childress, where he expected to be killed by Matthews and Cook.

McClure assured Beckham that he would see him safely to Matador, and they set out by rail for Childress, at which point they would take a team for the Motley county seat.

Matthews was on hand at Childress. He demanded Beckham of McClure, who refused to deliver his prisoner. Matthews then started to organize a posse to take Beckham. Word of this came to McClure, who promptly gave his prisoner a revolver and told him to help defend himself. Matthews and his crowd now tried to enlist the co-operation of Sheriff Cunningham of Abilene, who, as soon as he understood the situation, resigned from the Matthews force and offered to assist the McClure contingent. McClure thanked him, but said he guessed he'd go along to Matador, now, with his prisoner, as the team was waiting. Captain Bill was in Matador when Ranger and prisoner arrived, and Beckham was jailed without further difficulty. Cook was appointed sheriff by the Commissioners' Court, but the District Judge refused to accept him and selected a man named Moses for the job, whereupon Cook refused to resign and Captain Bill was sent over to turn him out, which he did with promptness and vigor. On his way back to Quanah, waiting for a train in Childress, Matthews appeared and demanded that McDonald dismiss Ranger-McClure on general charges connected with the Beckham episode. McDonald mildly but firmly refused an spoke his mind pretty freely on the subject. All of which added fuel to the old resentment which Matthews nursed and nourished in his bosom for Captain Bill.

He gave it out openly that he was going to wander over to Quanah some day and kill McDonald, just as a matter of pastime. Bill McDonald needed only the anticipation of a little pistol practice like that to make him sleep like an angel child.

"I didn't talk as loud as he did—nor as much," Captain Bill said afterward. "I reckon he thought I was afraid of him."

III

MATTHEWS had really cut the work out for himself, however, and had enlisted help for the occasion.

It was in December, 1895, at last that Matthews and his pals came down to Quanah for the declared purpose of killing a Ranger captain. It was a cold, dreary day and they visited one saloon after another, getting a supply of courage for the job and explaining what they were going to do. Then they took to following McDonald, always in a group, evidently waiting the proper opportunity, confident enough that McDonald would not take the offensive. Finally, however, they pressed him so close that he suddenly turned and told them to quit following him or trouble would ensue. They dropped away, for the

time, and McDonald gave the matter no further thought. Men threatening to kill him was an item on every day's program.

It was nearly dusk of that bleak day, and McDonald was in the railway station, sending an official telegram to his men at Amarillo, when an old man named Crutcher, whom McDonald knew, came in with the word that Matthews wanted to see him and fix up matters without any more trouble.

Captain Bill finished writing his telegram and sent it. Then turning to old man Crutcher he said in his slow, mild way:

"Well, that all sounds mighty good to me. I never want any trouble that I can help. Come on, let's go find him."

They left the depot on the side toward the town, and as they did so they saw the sheriff of Hardeman County, whose name was Dick Coffer, with Matthews and two of the latter's friends, coming to meet them. Sheriff Coffer was a step ahead of Matthews when they started across the street. Old man Crutcher in a friendly way put his arm through McDonald's as they advanced. When there was but four or five feet between the groups, all stopped and there was a little silence.

"I understand," Captain Bill began quietly, "that you have been saying some pretty hard things about me, and that you-all are going to wipe up the earth with me. Is that so?"

Matthews edged a trifle nearer to Coffer.

"No," he said, "I didn't say that, but by God I'll tell you what I did say," at the same moment pointing his left index finger in McDonald's face, while his right hand slipped in the direction of his hip pocket.

Captain Bill saw the movement and his own hand dropped into his side overcoat pocket where in winter he carried a part of his armament. Matthews' practice in drawing, for some reason, failed to benefit him. His gun seemed to hang a little in the scabbard. A second later he had jerked it free and stepping behind Coffer fired at Captain Bill over the sheriff's right shoulder. But the slight hitch spoiled his aim, perhaps, for the bullet missed, passing through McDonald's overcoat collar, though the range was so short that the powder burned his face.

The game could now be considered open. Captain Bill with a quick movement that was between a skip and a step got around Coffer and let go two shots in quick succession at Matthews. Both of McDonald's bullets struck within the space of a fifty-cent piece, just above Matthews' heart, penetrated a thick plug of Star Navy, found a heavy notebook behind it and stopped.

With a thought process which may be regarded as cool for such a moment, Captain Bill realized that for some reason he could not kill Matthews by shooting him on that side, and shifted his aim. Matthews, meantime, had again dodged behind Coffer, who now dropped flat to the ground, where it was quieter. Captain Bill was bending forward at the time, trying to get a shot around Coffer, and as the latter dropped, Matthews fired, the bullet striking McDonald in the left shoulder, ranging down through his lung to the small of his back, traveling two-thirds the length of his body for lodgment.

THE Ranger was knocked backward, but did not fall. Matthews quickly fired again, but McDonald was near enough now to knock the gun aside with his own, and the ball passed through his hat-brim. Aiming at Matthews' other shoulder, McDonald let go his third shot and Matthews fell.

Meantime the two deputy assassins had opened fire, and one of them had sent two bullets through McDonald's left arm. To these he gave no attention until Matthews dropped. Wheeling now he started to cock his gun, when he received another ball, this time in his right shoulder, along which it traveled to his neck, thence around the windpipe to the left side. His fingers were paralyzed by this wound and he made an effort to cock his gun with his teeth; but there was no further need, for with the collapse of Matthews his co-murderers fled wildly to cover, behind the depot, nearly upsetting a boxcar in their hurry, as a spectator remarked.

Captain Bill walked a few steps to the sidewalk. There was a post there, and holding to this he eased himself to a sitting position. A man ran up to him.

"Cap, how about it?"

"Well, I think I'm a dead rabbit."

They gathered him up and took him to a drugstore, and they took Matthews to

a drug store across the street. By and by they carried Captain Bill home and a doctor came to hunt for the bullets.

"Don't fool around with that one in my neck, Doc," Captain Bill said. "Go after the one in the small of my back, and let out the blood. There's a bucket of it sloshin' around in there."

The doctor obeyed orders. It was proper to gratify a dying man.

"Now, Doc," the Ranger captain said when the operation was over, and the surplus cargo had been removed, "now, I'll get well," and Rhoda McDonald, his nervy wife, who had arrived on the scene, echoed this belief.

"If Bill Jess says he'll get well, he'll do it!" she declared.

But this was a minority opinion, and that night when it was rumored that Captain Bill would not pull through, there were threats that in case he didn't, the two men who had trained with Matthews would be strung up without further notice. Some word of this was brought to Captain Bill, perhaps as a message of comfort.

"Don't you do it, boys," he said. "I'm going to get well, and even if I don't, I want the law to take its course. I'm opposed to lynching."

Matthews died in a few days. He was removed to Childress and died there. Before his death he sent word to McDonald.

"You acted the man all through," was his message. "I'm only sorry that I can't see you and apologize."

"Tell him that I'm doing all right," was the answer returned, "and that I hope he'll get well."

IV

THE mending of Captain Bill was a slow process. For about two months he was laid up, and then with his wife he sojourned for a time at a sanitarium. After that, he was up once more, pale and stooped but ready and eager for action. In time he was apparently well; though, in truth, the physical repairing was never quite complete.

Always a physical marvel, Captain Bill McDonald's great strength had come to his aid. He finally rejoined the Rangers, his eyes as bright and keen as ever.

When the news spread that he was again in action, the lawbreakers of the Panhandle took good care to keep out of his way, at least for a while.

Then an offender cropped up in the person of Joe Beckham, former sheriff of Motley, who had been held for trial on charges.

He was out on bond, but when his case came up in Baylor County, an old political rival named Cook came to testify against him.

Beckham met the train at the depot, and shot Cook dead. He then mounted a fleet horse, and rode into the Territory, safe from McDonald, who only operated in Texas.

Shortly afterward the captain heard of the murder, and it angered him to such an extent, that he swore he would put Beckham in jail, if it took the rest of his life to do it.

But another serious matter had now developed that diverted McDonald's mind into other channels. It was the San Saba affair.

It was an affair of bad men with the blood-lust—men who killed! And it aroused in Captain Bill the sense of a hound stalking its prey.

Certain citizens of San Saba County had petitioned the Governor to send Rangers to investigate numerous murders which had been committed in that locality—the number of assassinations then aggregating forty-three within a period of ten years.

In fact, San Saba and the country lying adjacent was absolutely controlled at that time by what was nothing less than a murder society. In an earlier day a sort of Vigilance Committee or mob had been organized to deal with lawless characters, but in the course of time the committee itself became the chief menace of the community. Whatever worthy members it had originally claimed, either dropped out or were "removed," and were replaced by men who had a private grudge against a neighbor; or desired his property; or were fond of murder on general principles.

THIS society of death was well organized. It had an active membership of about three hundred, with obligations rigid and severe. Their meeting place was a small natural pool of water, almost surrounded by hills. It bore the curiously appropriate name of "Buzzard's Water Hole," and here

they assembled once a month, to formulate plans for the removal of offending or superfluous friends. Sentinels were posted during such gatherings, and there were passwords and signs. They kept up the semblance of being inspired by lofty motives, and maintained the forms that go with religious undertakings; wherefore, being duly assembled to plot murder, they still opened their meetings with prayer!

To break up the Buzzard's Water Hole gang, and to discourage its practices in and around San Saba, was the job cut out for Bill McDonald and his Rangers during the summer and fall of 1897.

Captain McDonald began the work by sending over three of his men—John Sullivan, Dud Barker and Edgar Neil—to investigate. There was plenty of trail and the Rangers ran onto it everywhere. It wound in and out in a hundred directions, and gathered a regular knot around the seat of justice. Perhaps there were town and county officials who were not in the toils of the deadly membership, but if so they were not discoverable. Sullivan promptly got into trouble with the sheriff by rejailing a man whom he found outside, holding a reception with his friends, when the State had paid a reward for his capture. Sullivan and the sheriff both drew guns, but were kept apart, and the District Judge, who seemed to have been a sort of honorary "Buzzard," holding his office by virtue of society favor, undertook to get rid of Sullivan by sending him a long way off, after some witness supposed to be wanted; though why they should want any witness in a court like that would be hard to guess.

V

CAPTAIN BILL himself now came down to look over the field. He had his hands full from the start. When he arrived, Rangers Barker and Neil were patroling the town with guns, while a number of citizens similarly armed were collected about the streets.

"Hello, Dud," he said, "are you-all going to war?"

"Looks like it, Cap," returned Barker.

Captain Bill looked over at the armed citizens, and raised his voice loud enough for them to hear.

"Well, Dud, if that's the best they can do," he said, "we can lick 'em, can't we?"

"Yes, sir, if you say so, Cap."

The armed citizens showed a reluctance in the matter of hostilities and began to edge away. McDonald now got his mail and reviewed the situation, for prior to his coming he had scarcely known what the trouble in San Saba was all about. By and by he went to his hotel. It was about ten o'clock and he was sitting out in front, when he saw flashes and heard shots across the public square. The mob was shooting up the town for his benefit. Captain Bill seized his gun and went up there. The main disturbance seemed to be in and about a saloon. The Ranger Captain pushed into the place alone, compelled every man of the assembly to put up his hands and allow himself to be disarmed. He then required them to appear for examination next morning. They did appear, and were discharged, of course, but, nevertheless, it was evident that a man who would not be scared and who was not afraid to do things, was among them. Members of the society felt a chill of uneasiness. Worthy citizens, heretofore silent through fear of their lives and property, began to take heart.

McDonald now interviewed the sheriff and county officials in general and delivered his opinion of them, individually and collectively, concluding with the statement that he would bring Sullivan back as soon as a message and steam would get him. The sheriff replied that Sullivan and he could not stay in the same town.

"Then move," said Captain Bill. "The county will be rid of one damned rascal. It will be rid of more before I get through here."

Captain Bill went to Austin, himself, after Sullivan, so that there might be no mistake about his coming. He presented the case to Governor Culberson and got his sanction, then sent word to his men at San Saba to meet them, and he arrived with Sullivan, promptly on time. He had expected that there would be a demonstration by the sheriff and his friends, instead of which the streets of the little town were deserted.

It was clear now that to obtain evidence and convictions under such conditions as then prevailed in San Saba was going to

be a long, slow job. With officials incriminated and good citizens intimidated; with witnesses ready to come forward and swear anything in defense of the murderers, knowing they would be upheld in their perjury, the securing or good testimony and subsequent justice would be difficult.

THE Rangers went into camp in a picturesque spot on the banks of the San Saba River, a mile from town; pitched their tents under the shelter of some immense pecan trees, arranged their "chuck boards," staked their horses and made themselves generally comfortable. Then they posted sentinels (for a fusillade from the society was likely to come at any time), and settled down to business. Evidently they had come to stay. The murder society postponed its meetings.

Captain Bill now began doing quiet detective work, a labor for which he has a natural aptitude; anybody can see from the shape of his ears and nose, and from the ferret look of his eyes, that this would be so. Good citizens took further courage and came to the camp with information. The Ranger Captain looked over the field and undertook a case particularly cold-blooded and desperate.

A man named Brown, one of the society's early victims, had been hanged by that mob some ten or twelve years before, and his son Jim, though he had never attempted to avenge his father's death, had fallen under the ban. Jim Brown never even made any threats, but he must have been regarded as a menace, for one Sunday night while riding from church with his wife and her brother, he was shot dead from ambush; his wife, whose horse became frightened and ran within range, also receiving a painful wound.

Captain Bill secured information which convinced him that one Bill Ogle had been the chief instigator in this crime, and that the father and brother of Brown's wife were likewise members of the society and concerned in the plot. He learned, in fact, that the plan had been for Mrs. Brown's brother to ride with her, and for her father, Jeff McCarthy, to carry her baby by a different route to keep it out of danger. The brother, Jim McCarthy, was to stay close to his sister, to look after her horse and keep her out of harm's way while her husband was being murdered. It was due to the fact that Jim McCarthy did not perform his work well that the sister was wounded. McDonald, in due course, uncovered the whole dastardly plot.

The murderers now realized that trouble was in store for them. Some of the men began quietly to leave the county. Others consulted together in secluded places and plotted to "kill Bill McDonald." Sympathizing citizens encouraged this movement, and anonymous warnings—always the first resort of frightened criminals—began to arrive in the Ranger camp. Captain Bill paid no attention to such communications; he was used to them. He went on gathering and solidifying his evidence, preparatory to the arrest of Ogle and such of his associates as the proofs would warrant. Ogle, the "tiger" of the society, as he was considered, McDonald had not yet seen, for the reason that the tiger did not live in the town, and for some cause had lately avoided those precincts. He arrived, however, in due season. Perhaps the brotherhood let him know that it was time he was taking a hand in the game.

CAPTAIN McDONALD, one hot afternoon, was talking to an acquaintance on the streets of San Saba, when he noticed a stout, surly looking man, with the village constable, not far away. Now and then they looked and nodded in his direction, and presently an uncomplimentary name drifted to his ear.

"That is Bill Ogle, the worst man of the murder mob," a man told him.

He stepped briskly in the direction of the two men who, seeing him approach, separated and loafed off in different directions. Captain Bill overhauled the constable.

"See here," he said composedly, "I heard you call me a name a while ago when you were talking to that murderer, Bill Ogle, who is going down the street yonder. Now, an officer that throws in with a murder mob ain't worth what it would cost to try, and hang, and if I hear any more names out of you I'll save this county the expense of one rope, anyway."

The constable attempted to mutter some denial. Captain Bill left him abruptly with only a parting word of advice and set off down the street after the bad man.

Ogle had crossed the street and passed through the courthouse to a hardware store on the other side—where a number of his friends had collected.

"Don't go over there, Captain," cautioned his well-meaning friend, "you'll be killed, sure."

"I'd charge hell with a bucket of water," Captain Bill replied quaintly, continuing straight toward the mob in the store.

As he entered there was a little stir, then silence. Captain Bill walked over and faced Ogle.

"Come outside," he said quietly, "I want to talk to you."

Ogle hesitated.

"What do you want to say?" he asked sullenly.

"I want to say some things that you might not want your friends to hear," he said—and a quaver in his voice then would have been death—"Come outside!"

He applied a firm pressure to Ogle's shoulder and steered him for the door. The others, as silent as death, made no move. They did not offer to interfere—they did not attempt to shoot. They simply looked on, wondering.

Outside, Captain Bill led Ogle to the middle of the street. It was blazing hot and the sand burned through his boots, but he could talk to Ogle out there and keep an eye on the others, too.

"Now, Bill Ogle," he said, in his deliberate calm way—"I know all about you. I know how you and your outfit murdered Jim Brown—just how you planned it, and how you did it. I've got all the proof and I'm going to hang you if there is any law in this country to hang a man for a foul murder like that. That's what I'm here for, and I am not afraid of you, nor of any of the men over there in that store that helped you do your killing. You are all a lot of cowardly murderers that only shoot defenseless men from ambush, and I'm going to stay here until I break up your gang if I have to put every one on the gallows or behind the bars, and I'm going to begin with you."

As Captain Bill talked, the sweat began to pour off Ogle, and his knees seemed to weaken. Presently they could no longer support his stout body, and he sat heavily down in the hot sand, trying weakly to make some defense.

"Get up," said Captain Bill, "haven't you got your gun?"

"No, sir, Captain, I haven't."

"Well, you'd better get one if you're going to go hunting for me."

Ogle made several attempts to get on his feet, finally succeeded, and went back to his friends.

CAPTAIN BILL immediately set about getting out a warrant for his arrest, but after some delay, found he could not get the papers until next morning. Ogle, meantime, had been to his friend, the District Judge, who now appeared before the Ranger Captain with the statement that Ogle, whom he believed to be a square man, had said he wanted to leave the State for fear McDonald would kill him; McDonald, he said, having the reputation of being a killer and a bad man generally.

"Yes, Judge," said Captain Bill, "that's the proper reputation to give me, so that some of your crowd of murderers can assassinate me and your court can deliver a verdict that I was a bad citizen and ought to have been killed sooner, the way you've done about all the rest of the forty-three that have been murdered and no one tried for it in this section. Now, I intend to see that he don't leave this State, unless he leaves it in shackles. He committed this murder, and I can prove it. I've got one of the members of the mob as a witness."

Fearing that he would escape before the warrant could be issued, Captain McDonald instructed Rangers McCauley, Barker, Neil and Bell, members of his camp, to keep watch, and if Ogle attempted to leave the State to hold him until he (McDonald) could arrive with the proper papers. These were obtained next morning, about ten o'clock, and Captain Bill starting out with them, met his Rangers with Ogle, who had, in fact, attempted to get away. He was taken to jail and a strong guard was set.

Consternation now prevailed among the society and its friends; in the cowboy term they were "milling." Members of the mob were to turn State's evidence; one Josh McCormick, who had been made a member by compulsion—having run into one of their meetings—had been brought from an adjoining county and would testify; a

grand jury composed of exemplary citizens had been secured.

And that was not all. Captain Bill one day went to the District Judge, ostensibly for advice.

"Judge," he said, "I want some legal information."

The Judge was attentive, and took him to a quiet place.

"Now, Judge," said Captain Bill, "you know that the Buzzard Water Hole mob holds its meetings over there once a month, and the monthly meeting is about due. You know that they meet there to decide to kill somebody or to run him out of the State and take his property, and that they've already done such deviltry as that here for years."

The Judge assented uneasily.

"Well, then," continued the Ranger Captain, "I want to know if it will be all right for me to charge in there on that meeting with my Rangers and kill any of them that might make any resistance, and round up the rest and drive them into town and put them in jail—just drive them afoot like a lot of cattle and let their horses be sent for later; would that be all right, Judge?"

The District Judge was a good deal disturbed.

"No, Captain," he said, "I don't think you'd better undertake that; I should advise against such a move."

"Well, Judge," said Captain Bill, "that's exactly what I propose to do. I'll take chances on the results and I'll bring in the prettiest bunch of murderers you'll find anywhere. Good day, Judge, and thank you for the advice."

VI

HOWEVER, this program was not carried out—not in full. There was no material with which to make it complete. Within a brief time from his talk with the District Judge, Captain Bill's purpose was known to every member of the mob. It was a time to take to tall timber and high trees. The society adjourned *sine die*.

The Rangers did, however, visit the Buzzard's Water Hole at the time when the mob meeting was due. Not a soul was to be found anywhere. Then knowing certain members of the gang, and having learned the society signals, Captain Bill and his men went riding over the country from house to house, halting outside to call, "Hello!—Hello! Hello!" which was a signal call between members of the society. In reply to each such call a door opened and a man came out quickly, only to find the Rangers, who inquired if he were going to attend the meeting at Buzzard's Water Hole; whereupon, as Captain Bill put it later, "they like to died," and vigorously pretended ignorance of the meaning of the "Hello" signal. Next morning the Rangers were back in San Saba, and when the news came in that they had been around calling on mob members there was not only anxiety, but mystery, for some of these members of the society lived a distance of twenty-five miles away. But a fifty or seventy-five mile ride in a night on an errand of that kind was merely a little diversion to a Ranger.

The grand jury's work was difficult. It found indictments against many of the assassins, but the District Judge made an effort to annul most of these actions on one ground and another, and to trump up charges against the Rangers. McDonald finally gave this official a lecture which he probably remembers yet, if he is alive. About the same time one of the gang leveled a Winchester at Ranger Barker, who with his revolver shot him five times before he could pull the trigger, and was promptly cleared—all of which had a wholesome effect on the community as a whole.

WITH the arrest of Ogle, the anonymous letters became very terrible indeed.

The examining trial was an event in San Saba. Josh McCormick was chief witness for the State, and was a badly scared man, in spite of the fact that the Rangers had taken him to their camp and guaranteed him protection from the members of the Buzzard's Water Hole crowd. Other witnesses on both sides were frightened enough, for nobody knew what might happen before this thing ended. It was the program of the mob forces, of which Ogle and his lawyers were the acting principals, to impeach the State's witnesses and thus break down their evidence

before the court, as was their custom. Unfortunately for them they selected as one of their perjurers old Jeff McCarthy, father of Brown's wife, himself accessory to the crime for which Ogle was being tried. Captain Bill knew of McCarthy's relation to the affair, though the evidence had not been sufficient for his indictment. Furthermore, Captain Bill believed that the old man, like McCormick, whose uncle he was, had been forced into the band, and had acted under compulsion throughout.

McCormick was placed on the stand, and told what he knew about the society and its crimes in general, and about the killing of Jim Brown in particular. His absolute knowledge did not extend to the connection of the two McCarthys with the killing, and they were not mentioned in his evidence. When he left the stand, a number of nervous witnesses were called by the other side to swear that they would not believe him on oath. Finally old Jeff McCarthy was reached. He was frightened and trembling and in a wretched state altogether. Captain Bill watched him closely while he was making his statement concerning the worthless character of his nephew, McCormick, and the old man shifted and twisted to evade those eyes that were piercing his very soul. Now and then the Ranger Captain leaned toward him and lifted his finger like the index of fate, prompting the District Attorney meantime as to what questions to put to the witness. The old man became more and more confused and miserable, and when at last he was excused he tottered from the stand. He lingered about the place, however, seemingly unable to leave, and by and by, when court adjourned for the day, McDonald found him just outside the door, with others of his kind.

"JEFF," Captain Bill said in his calm drawl, "you did not tell the truth on the stand; you know every word was a lie."

Old Jeff McCarthy gasped, tried to get his words, gasped again and failed.

"I don't blame you so much," Captain Bill went on, "for you were afraid this mob would kill you if you didn't testify according to orders—now, wasn't you?"

Again the wretched old man made an effort to reply, but he was past speech.

Captain Bill's finger was pinning him fast.

"They frightened you and made you join their gang, didn't they? And now you would like to get out, but you don't know how—ain't that so?"

The old man was on the verge of utter collapse. He backed off and slunk away. After that Old Jeff haunted the Ranger camp and finally when he could stand it no longer made full confession to Captain Bill of his connection with the mob, revealing the mob's secrets, its signs and passwords, the names of its members and its gruesome oath.

"They will kill me," he said, "but I don't care. I'm happier now than I've been for years!"

"I don't reckon they'll try that," said Captain Bill. "That thing's about over around here."

They formed a guard and escorted the old man home, for he was full of fear.

When the court of examination adjourned, Ogle was held without bail. Through the efforts of District Attorney Lynden it was decided to transfer Ogle's case to Llano County for final trial, Lynden making his fight for this change on the grounds that no fair trial could be obtained in the San Saba court.

In Llano County, Ogle's case was fairly tried, and he received a life sentence. Two accessories to the killing of Brown were arrested, but just then war was declared with Spain; the Rangers were hastily ordered off to protect the Rio Grande frontier, where a Mexican incursion was expected, and without Captain Bill to keep up the vigorous action, and a sharp oversight on the witness stand, convictions were not obtainable.

However, the San Saba campaign was a success. The society that murdered men for spite, or gain, or pastime, no longer existed. When the next election of county officials came around the old lot was wiped out clean, and men of character and probity came into power.

Taken from "Bill McDonald, the Texas Ranger," by A. B. Paine, published by Gammel's Book Store, Austin, Texas.

Gun Wolves of the Chisholm

By WALT COBURN

Chisum, Goodnight, Chisholm, Slaughter! Ashes marked their campfires along the Chisholm Trail. But when lobo-guns unlimbered on a water-hole defi, Big Jim Trigg crossed their sign with trail-code lead and a free-water guarantee!

A Novelet of the Chisholm Trail

DRIPPING SPRINGS TANK was the only sizable strip of water in an arid section that stretched some fifteen or eighteen miles in any direction. It lay at the edge of a strip of wasteland, on the fringes of No Man's Land, along the cattle trail now established between Texas and Montana. A lake of steel-colored water held in a dun-colored basin of 'dobe clay. Commanches, Kiowas, wandering bands of renegade Apaches, the outlaw bands of whites and mixed breeds who made their homes in the much-disputed No Man's Land, all these had stopped at Dripping Springs Tank. Their camps were marked by dead ashes of buffalo chip campfires, there on the banks of the lake. But until men like John Chisum, Goodnight, Chisholm, Slaughter, intrepid frontier cowmen, had blazed the long trail from the Llano Estacada to Montana, Dripping Springs Tank had but little value save as a night's camping ground for Indians and the outlaws of No Man's Land.

But now the steel-hued lake became more treasured than flowing gold. Without its precious store of life-sustaining water, that short trail that passed it would be of no value. Should the water be cut off there, the trail drovers must, perforce, choose another route that added an extra hundred miles to the long, long journey northward.

The Lone Star State had bred strong men. Some of the finest, and a few of the worst that ever roamed the then uncharted and little known great Southwest. Five of the latter, cold-eyed, thin-lipped, quick-triggered renegades from the adjacent No Man's Land, now looked at Dripping Spring Tank with greedy eyes. They squatted there, built a horse corral and some sod huts, packed in a store of grub and corn whiskey, and put up a sign in a spot along the trail where the men pointing the north bound herds could not fail to read it.

WATER. TWO BITS A HEAD.

Their blue-steel guns backed their demand. Several small herds, traveling northward, were held up and their owners, small cowmen who had pooled their meager bunches of longhorns for the drive, were forced to pay the exorbitant fee of twenty-five cents per head. One or two had voiced protest. Their graves marked the place where they had last stood.

Word traveled back to the Texas ranches beyond the Llano Estacada, better known as the Staked Plains. So big Jim Trigg, owner of the Pot Hook iron, was forewarned. Trigg himself rode up on the point of his long herd. With him rode a slim-waisted, tow haired boy with grayish eyes, a large, humorous mouth, and quick moving, small-boned hands. The boy, not yet twenty, wore two guns, their worn leather holsters tied down on his thighs. On the opposite point of the herd were two other Texans, grim-jawed, quiet men.

Jim Trigg halted at the sign. He bit off a piece of twist tobacco, crunched it to a pulp between strong, white teeth, and expectorated. The weather bleached sign was stained brown. The tow haired boy grinned widely, loosened his two long barreled guns a little, and said nothing. The two Texans on the other side of the point cut through the plodding, thirsty, dust-powdered steers, and joined Jim Trigg and the boy. Just as the five men who had turned the lead steers back, rode up to the trail herd owner. Each of the five men had a gun in his hand. Their leader leered at the leathery-faced, white haired trail drover.

"Two bits a head, mister. Cash er cat-

The big man was rushing again. Jess avoided him, and his tough fists crashed into the bearded face, drawing blood, staggering the cowpuncher.

tle. Ante up." His four comrades grinned.

The blue eyes of Jim Trigg were the color of clear ice. The tow headed boy grinned the wider.

"I'm too old a man," said Trigg harshly, "tuh learn new tricks. I reckon, you low down rascals, that some of us is a-goin' tuh die."

THE renegade fired from the hip. But a split-second too late. Jim Trigg's bullet had spoiled his aim. It had also ended the career of that killer. The tow headed boy still grinned. Black smoke spiraled from his two gun barrels. The boy's guns had each exacted their deadly toll. Trigg's two Texans had each got a man. Of the five renegades who had been alive but a few moments before, only one now lived. That one, writhing there in the yellow dust, was whining for mercy. The boy thumbed back the hammer of one gun and grinned inquiringly at his boss. Jim Trigg shook his head.

"I reckon, Kid, that we'll patch up that 'un and send him back where he come from as a warning to others of his kind."

"Better lemme kill the snake," mildly argued the youth, "while the chances is good. Rattlesnakes is dangerous."

Jim Trigg eyed the youth curiously. Perhaps he wondered how a boy, barely old enough to grow a beard, could kill a man too badly hurt to defend himself. Jim Trigg had killed men, even as he had killed this renegade outlaw, but always he had given that man an even break. And here was this boy waiting for permission to send a bullet into the head of a wounded man.

"We'll patch him up, Kid, and send him back to No Man's Land. Put up yore guns, boys."

One of the Texans was calmly tying up a wounded arm. He gave no sign of pain, though the jagged wound must have hurt him badly. Jim Trigg swung from his saddle and bandaged the bleeding hole in the outlaw's shoulder. The other Texan and the boy moved off at a long trot to handle the cattle. The boy re-loaded his guns as he rode. Jim Trigg put the wounded man back into his saddle and gave him blunt instructions.

That evening, when the herd had been watered and allowed to graze onto the bed-ground, Jim Trigg and some of his men buried the four nameless outlaws. The big sign, WATER. TWO BITS A HEAD, served as the headboard of the four graves that lay side by side. Jim Trigg took a can of paint and a brush from the mess-wagon. Under the wording of the water sign he added: FREE WATER. And his dripping brush drew a line through the wording above.

By word of mouth, from the Staked Plains to Sun River, up in Montana, the story was told around campfires and in the saloons of Dodge City, Abiline, and other towns along the trail. Jim Trigg became "Free Water" Trigg.

The tow headed youth had drifted into New Mexico. His guns were destined to write red chapters into the history of cowland. He was fated to become one of the notorious warriors of the bloody war in Lincoln County. His name was William Bonney. He is better remembered as Billy the Kid.

TWO years of sun and wind and rain had dimmed the lettering of Free Water Trigg's sign at Dripping Springs Tank. Another big herd of longhorns in the Pot Hook iron went up the trail. And because of Indians and rustlers, Jim Trigg still piloted his herds as far as the Red River of the South. Once more he rode up on the point of the crawling herd as it drifted up the trail and kicked up a long cloud of dust. Under the wide, flat brim of his hat, the cowman's dust-reddened eyes sighted a horseman there by the weatherbeaten sign. His puckered blue eyes hardened. His voice was flat and deadly as he returned the "howdy, mister" of a tall, sun browned youth who slouched in a dilapidated saddle that was cinched to the back of a dun colored mule. Then the grizzled cowman's face lost its harshness. The young man on the dun mule was anything but dangerous looking. He wore no gun. His home made clothes were threadbare. The feet in the stirrups were bare of boots or covering of any kind. The face of the boy was ruggedly frank, the hazel eyes were clear and steady gazing under the shadow of a worn old hat whose flapping brim had been tied up to the crown with a bit of rawhide string. His wide smile of greeting was the

friendly, eager grin that had no hidden meaning. He looked like some plowboy strayed from the corn field.

"This here is the fust big herd I ever sighted," he explained. "Seed yore dust yesterday so me'n brother Lige drifted that stuff of ourn back off so's they wouldn't get mixed."

"Good idee, son. You aimin' tuh trail north?"

"No suh. Shucks, we ain't got but a smatterin' uh stock, me'n paw'n Lige. We was kinda aimin' tuh locate here at Drippin' Springs fer a spell. We was a-figgerin' on moseyin' on fu'ther but paw's ailin'. Kain't make out tuh ride much. Paw 'lows he's a-totin' about five-six pounds of Yank lead aroun' his system. He fit with Quantrell. Doggone, but I'm a gabbin' like a magpie. 'Tain't often I git tuh talk with folks." He grinned an apology. Jim Trigg caught himself almost smiling in sympathy. And Free Water Trigg was not a man easily given to smiling.

"Well, young feller, yo're mighty welcome tuh locate here, so far as I'm concerned, though it's bleak fer winter range. But don't you and yore brother Lige and yore lead-totin' paw make the mistake uh corralin' that water er charging folks two bits a head."

The boy laughed heartily. "Shucks, no, mister. Afore we left Kansas we done heard about Free Water Trigg. They claim he's pizen straight. Got more notches on his gun than a boy in the fifth grade kin count. Some claims he's ornery an' a land grabber an' a doggone cow thief. Paw 'lows different. Says if it's the same Jim Trigg he knowed when he rid with Quantrell, them as claims Free Water Trigg is jest a killer, lies."

Free Water Trigg pulled the palm of his hand down across his drooping white mustache and spat thoughtfully.

"Tell yore paw I'll drop over and see him this evenin' after the herd's drifted off water. And when yuh go back to yore house, don't cut through the herd."

"Law, I ain't so plumb jug headed as all that, mister. An' if I kin he'p out ary, I'd be right proud tuh lend a hand."

"Yuh might come in right handy, son, back there with the drags. I'll pay yuh."

"Paw'd hide me, I reckon, if I tuk pay fer he'pin' a man thataway, bein', neighborly, yuh might say."

FREE WATER TRIGG forestalled further conversation by riding away. The boy and his mule went back along the long string of cattle, to the drag end. The cattle had smelled the water and were bawling. The leaders had broken into a trot. The riders on the point were busy spreading the herd fanwise, holding up the leaders a little, manipulating the thirsty steers so as to prevent a pile up. They worked easily, each man doing his bit without sign of an order from Trigg. They knew their work and their easy skill made a ticklish, difficult task look simple.

Out of the dust came their drawling voices, "Ho, ho, ho, walk, li'l' dogies. Yo, ho, ho," chanting their song. "Hooo-up, hooo-up, ho," clicking hoofs, swishing leather. Powdery dust was rising sluggishly, settling on men and horses and cattle. Now and then a rider showed dimly. The walk-bawl of longhorned cattle. The muffled, doleful song of a drag rider. *For I'm a wild cowboy and I know I done wrong.*

To the boy on the mule this drab, dusty, monotonous work spelled romance and adventure. These cattle and the men with them, going up the long trail. Through wild country still claimed by warring Indians. Through heat and hunger and bitter cold and rain and black, death laden stampedes. Dodge City, the metropolis of the cattle trail, with its gunmen and lights and dance halls and boot hill. Bat Masterson's city. These men of the dangerous trail would see it all. Not all of them would come back. With awed, respectful manner, he greeted the several men he met. Not much older than himself. They wore cowhide boots and leather chaps and guns. Their faces were unshaven, their squinted eyes filled with dust. Their saddles were good, their spurs and bits inlaid with silver. They had a swaggering, carefree grace. Those nearer the mule rider's age were a little patronizing. But all were friendly in a backward, quiet, stand-offish way. Their breed are slow to make conversation with strangers.

"Howdy, cowboys."

"Howdy."

He told them his name. Jess Butter-

field. He helped them along with the drags. Their eyes followed his movements. They winked and grinned at one another at first, because Jess Butterfield appeared to be a farm boy. But they saw, by those little signs plain to cowmen, that this boy savvied cattle. So did the dun mule. Not much chance, there with the drags, for a cowboy to display his wares. But handling beef cattle is, in itself, an art. Ignorance or smart-Aleck tactics can do much harm. No heeling or hazing of steers is permitted. Many a trail boss would fire a man caught with his rope unbuckled while on day herd or along the trail. From Texas to Montana is a long trail and sore footed cattle that cannot keep up must be dropped.

There was a yearling bull in the herd. A small, black bull that had slipped in and passed unnoticed. The black yearling dragged along on limping feet, stopping often.

"Don't look like that black yearlin' could make 'er plumb north," ventured Jess Butterfield. "Acts plumb tuckered."

"He's got tuh be a dad gummed nuisance. We dropped him two-three times along the trail. Left him with other cattle. But he'd drift in about second guard time, played out, but on the prod, with a coyote er two a-trailing him. Onct we seen him, back yonder. Two loper-wolves a-trying fer tuh ham-string him and git him down. What do you think that li'l' ol' black bull done? He was too laig weary tuh fight. So he sat down. Ask any uh the boys. Yes, sir. Sat down so's them varmits couldn't ham-string 'im. Bellerin' like all git-out. Me'n Shorty went back an' taken a shot or two at the wolves. Mister bull gits up, tries tuh hook us, an' starts off after the herd a-ringin' his tail an' a-bellerin'. So we done named him Settin' Bull."

THE black bull, tongue out, stumbled weakly along. He stopped, sullied long strings of slobber hanging from his mouth. Jess Butterfield dismounted. Settin' Bull charged feebly, went down on his knees, and the barefoot youth picked up the bawling yearling and started for his mule.

"Whoa, thar. Steddy, naow, mule. Whoa, Wisdom." The mule lay back its long, sand colored ears, but stood steady as Jess Butterfield, with surprising ease, lifted the yearling bull and laid him, bawling defiantly, across the saddle. Then Jess mounted, riding behind the old saddle.

A big, black-bearded man on a sweat streaked bay gelding rode up. He returned the nod and Howdy of Jess Butterfield with a scowl.

"Look here, sod buster," he addressed Jess in a growling tone, "if yo're a-aiming tuh git off with that yearlin', yo're badly mistook. Stealin' from Free Water Trigg is bad luck."

Jess Butterfield's good-natured face turned red. The easy good-natured look faded from his level gazing hazel eyes.

"I reckon, mister, that yo're makin' some mistake. I ain't a cow thief, no more than you are Free Water Trigg. Trigg's older'n you. I was just he'pin' out back here like the boss-man said I could. I ain't a cow thief." He stepped off the mule.

"I reckon," he said flatly, "that one of us is a-goin' tuh git a whuppin'. Git off yore horse."

The black bearded man looked a little surprised. Then he leered and winked at those nearest him. The cowpunchers, ever eager for excitement, grinned expectantly. Blackbeard unbuckled his gun belt and hung it across the horn of his saddle. He was a size bigger than the boy. Longer of reach, heavier of build. "Step up and git it, farmer."

Jess stepped up, his big, work toughened fists swinging loosely. The cowpuncher swung hard. Missed. Jess had ducked the blow and closed in. Suddenly, as their bodies thudded together, the black bearded man's big frame went into the air, feet kicking. The next instant he lay on his back in the thick dust, the breath jolted from him, gasping, purple with anger. Jess Butterfield stood back. The boy's lips moved a little. "Git up." He spoke through clenched teeth. His face looked white now, under its bronze. His eyes blazed with anger. The big man was on his feet, rushing again, more wary. Jess avoided the rush. His tough fists crashed into the bearded face, drawing blood, staggering the cowpuncher. The boy followed it up with two swift body blows that doubled the big man up. A crashing left

swing to the jaw finished the job. Blackbeard lay quivering, his bloody face in his arms, there in the dust.

"Put the boots to 'im," came the cold-blooded advice from some young cowboy. Kicking a fallen foe was in keeping with the rules of rough-and-tumble fighting. Jess stepped forward, standing over the whipped man.

"Am I a cow thief?"

"No," came the muffled reply.

"Got a-plenty?"

"A-plenty fer now. I'm whipped."

Jess Butterfield went back to his mule. The black bull, tied to the saddle, was bawling angrily. Wisdom, the mule, showed plainly, with ears and rolling eyes, that he disliked the burden. But Jess rubbed the mule's nose and swung back behind the saddle. The bull quit bellering. Jess Butterfield had a away with animals. Free Water Trigg rode up as blackbeard was getting onto his feet. The old cowman looked from the bloody cowpuncher to Jess, who was blowing softly on his skinned knuckles. No question passed Trigg's lips, however. The black bearded man buckled on his belt, buttering into his thick, blood matted whiskers. His face was yellow with dust. One eye was puffing rapidly. With a quick, muttered curse, the big man swung about, his long barreled Colt in his hand.

"I wouldn't," snapped Free Water Trigg. "The boy ain't armed, Cherokee. If I was you, I'd put up that gun."

"Is that the way you back yore trail boss' play, Trigg?" sneered the man Trigg had addressed as Cherokee.

"The lad ain't armed," Trigg's voice was harsh. "I don't stand for murder."

"Law!" gasped the boy, "are you Free Water Trigg?" He paid no heed to Cherokee.

ONE of the younger cowboys laughed. That broke the tension. Jess Butterfield's embarrassment was so ludicrous. Threatened tragedy became comedy. Trigg's leathery face crinkled into one of his rare smiles. Cherokee had put up his gun and rode away.

"I wasn't aimin' tuh begin no ruckus, Mister Trigg. Only that feller called me a cow thief fer packin' that played-out yearlin'."

"And you licked Cherokee fair?"

"Which he shore did," grinned a cowpuncher. "Fair and purty. With four-five blows. Never seen nothin' purtier. Cherokee dropped like a mule had kicked him."

"You've licked a man that travels a lot on his toughness, boy," said Trigg. "Cherokee's worked for the Pot Hook a year now. It's the fust time I ever knowed him to be licked. You must be right handy."

"Me'n brother Lige fights a heap, fer fun. Lige kin th'ow ary man his size. He's always figgerin' out new holts."

Free Water Trigg looked at the boy's muscular neck and shoulders and arms and chest, the muscles bulging and rippling smoothly under the tight fitting hickory shirt. The cowman's eyes lighted up with admiration. He seemed about to say something, then thought better of it. Almost gruffly he told Jess Butterfield to keep the black bull yearling.

"He'll never make it up the trail. He ain't bin branded. Put him in yore iron."

That evening about dark Free Water Trigg rode over to the sod house where the Butterfields lived. He sat there smoking and talking to the elder Butterfield whom he remembered from the war days. Jess' father was but a wasted shadow of a man who once had been of powerful build. He was not long for this world.

"Jess is a good boy," he told Trigg when the cowman offered his old comrade's son a job with the trail herd. "He's got a-plenty tuh learn but he don't have tuh be told anything more'n once. Lige is the same way. Their mother was bright thataway. Want tuh go up the trail, Jess?"

More than anything in the wide world, Jess Butterfield longed to go up the trail. But he shook his head. "I reckon I'll stay here." His grin hid the ache in his heart. He was staying because his father needed him.

"The offer always stands for you and yore brother, Jess," said Trigg as he shook hands and left.

Jess had built a pen for Settin' Bull. At daybreak next morning the boy stood there in the pen, his eyes misty with longing, watching the big herd move slowly off the bedground bound north. The black bull yearling, almost human in his stub-

born determination to go along with the herd, was bawling loudly, making frantic efforts to break out of the pen. So they stood, the black yearling and the boy, watching the last drags out of sight.

It was a month and a half before Free Water Trigg came back along the trail with some horses he had bought at Dodge.

There was no sign of life at Dripping Springs Tank. Behind the sod house was a grave about two weeks old. On its wooden headboard was the rudely carved name of Samuel Butterfield. Trigg knew that the two brothers, Lige and Jess, had taken their cattle and moved on. On along that trail that their father was too ailin' tuh foller.

A HEAVY crop of black beard concealed the outlines of the man's face. The hawklike nose had been broken and mended crookedly. His hair, thick and almost curly, hung to his shoulders. But the greenish-gray eyes of Cherokee were the same eyes of the wounded man to whom Free Water Trigg had given the life which Billy the Kid had wanted to snuff out with a bullet. Sometimes when the grizzled old cowman stared hard at him Cherokee wondered if Trigg ever suspected. Hardly likely. Because even men who had known him fairly well had failed there at Dodge City to recognize him. He had passed the keen scrutiny of even Bat Masterson and his deputies. To Cherokee that had been the acid test. There remained but one man whose cold, searching eyes he dreaded to ever meet. That was William Bonney, better known as Billy the Kid. Cherokee had seen the Kid at Santa Fe, but had left town before he had a chance of being recognized. So he had stayed clear of Santa Fe and other places where he was likely to run foul of that young killer.

Because he was an excellent trail boss and had courage of a sort, Free Water Trigg had given him free rein. Twice now he let Cherokee take his herds up the trail without assistance from the owner. Three years had brought changes. The Indians had given up after several disastrous attempts trying to stampede the big herds protected by men who knew how to fight. And somehow Cherokee was not molested by white rustlers who preyed upon the large herds going up the trail.

If Free Water Trigg had any ideas on the subject of passing unmolested across No Man's Land he kept those ideas strictly to himself. Nor did he question Cherokee on that rather delicate subject. Because those were the days when the cattle barons could not afford to be too scrupulous regarding the men who handled their cattle. There was, perforce, law in the bigger towns. Dodge City had its Bat Masterson. Wyatt Earp was putting the fear into the lawless renegades of Tombstone. A tall buffalo hunter had come to New Mexico and the name of Pat Garrett was spreading across New Mexico. Men said that Pat Garrett would eventually, if he lived, bring law and order into Lincoln County.

But the open country, with its fertile lands and great herds, where cowmen claimed domains larger than many kingdoms, had no law save the law of power as it was enforced, justly or unjustly, by the quick triggered men who drew pay from the cattle barons. It was, in the main, a question of the survival of the fittest. If those men of the plains, those cattle kings, did wrong, their mistakes and shortcomings were not petty ones. Their faults, like their virtues, were those of strong men. Each was a law unto himself. That law was no stronger than the man who made it and enforced it at the end of his guns.

If it was apparent to Free Water Trigg that his foreman Cherokee was friendly with the outlaws of No Man's Land, he undoubtedly figured that the friendship was Cherokee's business so long as Cherokee acted square with the man who paid him good wages. Should Cherokee prove disloyal then it was plainly up to Trigg to act.

So matters stood that day in early spring when Cherokee went up the trail with the Pot Hook herd. In the mind of the black bearded trail boss lurked a plan. And this plan was, if it worked out, a flagrant breach of loyalty to Trigg.

Because it was the ironclad rule of Free Water Trigg that no critter save cowbrutes marked and branded in the Pot Hook iron should go up the trail with his herd. No strays. There was no exception to that rule. Other trail drovers might

accept steers belonging to smaller owners who were in the habit of pooling with larger outfits. But Free Water Trigg's herd was always a straight Pot Hook herd. Before that herd left the Staked Plains, each and every steer was put into the Pot Hook. It was Trigg's road iron as well as his regular iron. That is to say, if he bought cattle, including the brands of those cattle, they wore the Pot Hook before they left the Llano Estacada to go up the trail.

BUT a three day's drive from Dripping Springs Tank, Cherokee laid over one day. The evening of that day, as the Pot Hook herd was being bedded down, seven heavily armed men joined the outfit. With them they brought a cavvy of horses and six hundred head of cattle. Half a dozen different brands marked these cattle that came out of No Man's Land. The seven men greeted Cherokee with the profane and casual manner of old friends. Their cattle showed signs of having been driven too fast. One of the men had a fresh bullet wound in his leg.

The Pot Hook cowhands showed neither pleasure nor resentment at the arrival of these men. The night hawk and day wrangler swore a little because these new horses would be apt to stray the first few nights and days until they got used to the trail and the company of the Pot Hook remuda. But the cowboys accepted the newcomers with careless indifference. Cherokee, in their combined opinion, was ramrodding the outfit. If he chose to cross Free Water Trigg, that was his lookout. There were a few grumbling remarks about "a herd so big a man couldn't shoot across it." More work. But the newcomers seemed friendly enough. They had fetched along several jugs of corn whisky. That night everybody got a little tipsy. Cherokee told them flatly that he'd fire any man that got drunk. They were a little afraid of Cherokee. They had seen him kill two men in the past couple of years. And excepting that once when Jess Butterfield had trimmed him, they had never seen Cherokee whipped by any man. So they obeyed him. The more so now because these newcomers, hard looking men, were friends of Cherokee's.

They crossed the Red River. The big herd pushed slowly on northward. In that herd was a big black four-year-old steer branded with a Box B on the left ribs. The biggest steer in the herd, and, so the cowboys learned, a natural leader though ornery. The big black steer had come with that herd out of No Man's Land. Gentle enough, after a fashion, but without fear of man or horse. When Cherokee had sighted the steer he rode close and examined the animal carefully. There were eighty-three other big steers out of that No Man's Land herd that wore the Box B iron. Cherokee questioned a lanky individual with sandy hair and beard and eyes that were badly crossed. The two men conversed, apart from the others, in low tones. The sandy haired man, Cherokee called him Fisher, grinned, showing a set of broken, tobacco strained snaggle teeth. He said something and showed the trail boss a fresh notch on the cedar butt of a long barreled Colt gun that boasted of four other notches besides the freshly cut one. Cherokee laughed raspingly and they came back to the fire and had a drink from the jug.

Contrary to the usual custom, they skirted Dodge City. They made a dry camp some miles from the cowland metropolis and Cherokee himself drove the chuck wagon into town for grub. No other man was allowed to go to town.

"I'll fetch back all the licker you boys kin hold," promised the trail boss. "Them as craves gamblin' kin git accommodated right here at camp. Them as figgers they can't go no further along the trail without seein' the sights uh Dodge kin draw their time and they don't need tuh come back. Them as stays gits a extra month's pay when this herd is delivered an' paid for at Fort Shaw, up in Montana. Who wants tuh see Dodge? Speak up."

Two men wanted to go to town. Cherokee paid them off. It was dusk when they saddled up their private horses and loaded their combined bed on their own pack horse. One of them had shaved and put on his town clothes. He had taken a brand new black hat from his warsack and discarded his old one. His partner wore a pair of new boots.

"So long, boys." The two rode away into the dusk. Shortly afterward Fisher and a man known as Stubbs forked their

night horses and rode away without a word. They were back in an hour. Fisher wore a brand new black hat. Stubbs had on a pair of new boots that were a size too small and had to be slit across the instep with a knife blade.

Not more than five miles from camp, the wolves, circled two huddled forms that lay, very stiff and unnaturally in a buffalo wallow. They had been shot from ambush. The wolves, sniffing the odor of fresh blood, closed in. Warily at first, then growing more bold. Snapping, snarling, tearing. All timidness gone now. Cherokee, returning from town, sighted the snarling wolf pack and grinned. Because Fisher had carried out orders.

Not through any personal enmity had those two men been murdered in cold blood. But because Cherokee and his friends from No Man's Land were planning to steal the Pot Hook herd. At St. Louis was a firm that would buy the entire herd. He would pay a price that was but half the regular market value. But he would ask no questions. And Cherokee had no intention of letting any man from his outfit get to town where he might do some careless talking about the mixed herd that was going up the trail.

JESS BUTTERFIELD and his brother Lige were in Dodge City. Lige wore a bandage about his head and across one cheek. They were talking earnestly to Bat Masterson and Charlie Bassett, who was one of Masterson's assistants as Peace Commissioner of turbulent Dodge.

"Us boys follered the sign keerful," Jess was explaining. "There was seven of these fellers from No Man's Land. They throwed in with the Pot Hook herd."

Bat Masterson and Charlie Bassett exchanged glances. These two young cowboys seemed sincere enough. Still, there were some mighty bold men these days who had clever schemes of rustling cattle.

"How many head of stuff did you boys lose?"

"Eighty-three head. All in the Box B iron."

"Got any way of provin' yore ownership of that iron?"

"No papers," spoke up Lige, who seemed to have the habit of letting Jess act as spokesman. "Nothin' but our word. But we're strangers in a strange land where our word don't buy much."

A soft chuckle came from Jess. His open hand slapped his thigh. "Mister," he said, his eyes alight, "I kin prove ownership to the Box B iron, if you'd ride out to that herd with us."

Lige stared hard at his brother, puzzled at Jess' animation. Charlie Bassett puffed thoughtfully at his cigar. Then he consulted a heavy silver watch. He looked at the sliver of moon.

"You couldn't even read a brand in this light, Butterfield."

"I don't need no better light, mister, if yuh'll ride out there. Honest. I ain't a-funnin'," Jess spoke with eagerness that was almost like the mute pleading of a hungry dog. The officer rose and nodded.

"I'm just fool enough tuh be curious."

THEY rode out to the Pot Hook camp. Cherokee, backed by his men from No Man's Land, met them with hard stares that held nothing of friendliness. They knew Bassett. They knew that if anything should happen to him, Bat Masterson would exact punishment that would be swift and severe.

"Git on yore horse, Cherokee," said Bassett, "and ride out to the herd with us. The rest of yore men stay here."

"What's the idee?" asked the Pot Hook boss suspiciously.

"You'll see."

Jess pointed to a Pot Hook cowboy who had recognized him and grinned a welcome. "You mind comin' along, mister? I jest wanted a Pot Hook man fer witness."

"He'll come," said Bassett. The five rode off together. Out to the sleeping herd. Jess led them to a knoll some distance from the herd.

"You boys stay right here." Jess rode alone toward the herd.

They waited for ten minutes. Then they saw a queer sight. Jess Butterfield on foot. At his heels was a huge black steer that followed him like a dog. Jess' horse trailed behind, bridle reins hung over the saddle horn. Lige chuckled and whispered something in Bassett's ear. Bassett nodded.

Jess halted. He rubbed the big steer between those pointed horns that had a six foot spread. He climbed on the steer's

back and sat there, pulling its ears.

"This steer was give me by Free Water Trigg. The boys called him 'Settin' Bull.' I kin prove it by that there cowboy. I put him into our iron, the Box B. Made a sort of pet outa him because he was the orneriest dad-burned thing I ever tried tuh tame. Mr. Bassett, them other steers wears the same iron as Settin' Bull. I reckon that kinda proves what I claim."

"That's a lie," growled Cherokee. "Trigg owns that Box B brand. That black critter is a gentle old work ox. Anybody kin do what that feller is doin'."

Jess slid off the black steer's back and smiled grimly. "Me'n brother Lige will bet every head uh stock in the Box B iron, and as a side bet, I'll put up my saddle, gun, hat, boots, and underclothes, everything I own down to my sox, that you can't walk up afoot to this black steer. I bet Settin' Bull puts yuh back on yore hoss quicker'n you kin spit."

With a muttered curse Cherokee swung to the ground and started for the big black steer. With a snort, the steer charged. Cherokee made a leap for his horse as one horn ripped his shirt up the back as neatly as a knife could have done it. The trail boss reached for his gun, white with fury. But Lige's gun was out, its muzzle in Cherokee's ribs.

"Dunno ary reason why I shouldn't kill yuh now," drawled Lige. "Except that you called my brother a liar. He'll want tuh hear yuh take that back."

Jess was scratching Settin' Bull's shoulders with a stick. The big black steer stood there, content. "Feel like skinnin' 'er back, mister, er shall I whup yuh like I done before? Is them Block B cattle Trigg's?"

"No," growled Cherokee sulkily.

"I'll be back out in the mornin'," said Bassett, "to work this herd. I'm deputizing the Butterfield brothers to stay with the herd. If they have any trouble out here, Cherokee, you and some more men I recognized at yore camp will stretch rope. Good night."

"Come on to camp," Cherokee grunted at the Pot Hook man.

"I reckon not, Cherokee. I'll pool my luck with these two boys. So will some others that won't be at the wagon when you git back. Fisher and Stubbs murdered two boys tonight. They even bin braggin' about it. Them murdered boys has friends. If I was you, I'd drag it for Mexico afore Trigg lines his sights on yuh." The cowboy grinned crookedly after the departing Cherokee.

JUST before daylight a man rode out to the herd. It was Free Water Trigg. For rumor had reached the Pot Hook ranch that there was something queer about the mixed herd that was going up the trail.

"Unless you boys want tuh cut back, Jess," said the old cowman, "I'll bust my rule an' let the Box B stuff go up with mine. And I'd be proud to hire you two boys."

"I reckon," said Jess slowly, "that I'll jest nacherally have tuh foller this herd. Yuh see, that Settin' Bull is dead bent on a-goin' up the trail, an' he's stubborn as all git-out. He's led the herd since he got into it. It'd bust his ornery heart tuh turn back. Me'n Lige'll be proud tuh go, suh."

So Free Water Trigg annexed the Butterfield boys that later became his partners. And because a leader like the big black steer was worth his weight in silver, Settin' Bull was shipped back by boat to St. Louis. He became famous from the Rio Grande to Sun River as a leader. Even as Jess Butterfield was known as a top trail boss.

Explaining to Bassett and Bat Masterson the manner of Cherokee's sudden passing, Free Water Trigg had jerked a thumb toward a new grave. "I thought that cuttin' his rattles off would make him over from a rattlesnake into a harmless gopher snake. Knowed he was the same man I'd kep' Billy the Kid from killin', but I give him a chance tuh make good. Give him a slack rein. But I wa'n't fool enough tuh not keep a eye on 'im. When there was rattlesnake signs on his trail, I come on along. When he sights me, he claws fer his gun. My bullet ketched him plumb between the horns. Billy would shore make me set up the drinks if he knowed about that rattler."

And Free Water Trigg allowed a grin to lighten up his somber, leathery face.

Last-Stand Stockade

A novelet of the Santa Fe Trail

By LINTON DAVIES

THE slight *clink* of metal on stone broke the brooding hush that enveloped the sunlit plains-country. Out from among the cottonwoods that flanked the shallow lazy river, a lean horseman emerged, long St. Louis rifle held easy but ready in the crook of his buckskin-fringed arm.

Still half hidden by the fresh green spring foliage, he checked his mount. His glance darting up-river, then down. He scanned the bowlder-strewn bottoms and

Massacre was scrawled along the wagon-train track in letters of blood. Men and women, a captive herd, dragged across the heat-blasted Staked Plains, prodded by Apache bows and Renegade flintlocks. Only one thing could save that remnant from knife and torture-stake—a buckskin-man miracle!

On the water side of the stockade he pulled rein and hailed again—"Hi! Open up!"

the enveloping cottonwoods as if seeking a hovering menace behind rock or shrub. His horse, ears cocked, stood wary and alert.

The rider completed his survey, eased the rifle, then with the touch of his moccasined heels he urged the big rangy sorrel forward. The big gelding readily stepped over

the sandy ground and splashed into the purling muddy water, picking its way daintily around outcrops of rock. On the far bank the rider guided his animal toward a break in the trees that betokened a dim trail.

Suddenly he drew back sharply on the reins, halting the sorrel in midstride, and peered narrowly at a little clump of small stones, each no bigger than a man's fist, that lay almost in his path. Once more he turned to survey the quiet valley. Then with an easy shift of his buckskin-clad weight he swung from the horse and with rifle at the ready he stepped forward to stand over the stones.

There were four. And they lay two by two over and aslant a big bone, the thigh bone of an antelope, as if to hold it flat and steady on the rocky ground against the beat of the winds or the prying foot of some wilderness creature.

The tall rider pushed his coonskin cap off his forehead and bent to study the prisoned bone. His well-knit figure tensed. Here was Indian talk.

Painted on the whitened surface in clear brown stain was a row of figures—human figures. Seven men hatted and belted—and pierced with arrows. Below, a plains wagon, burning, with even a crude representation of ashes and wagon irons in the simple scene.

The meaning of the hieroglyphics was plain. Seven white men had died at redmen's hands, and a wagon—maybe more—had gone up in smoke. Perhaps a whole train!

One bone. That meant one day's journey. And the small end pointed west.

The man in the coonskin cap rose quickly to his feet, stared westward, then with quick decision strode to the sorrel's side and mounted. Without ado he reined the big horse to a fast trot into the west.

As he rode he reached for a pistol slung in a heavy holster at his saddle bow, noted with satisfaction the good order of its priming, and slapped it back into its leather sheath. His rifle he knew was ready for instant service.

And immediate danger lay ahead, that he knew. For the stain on that talk bone was fresh—no sign of weathering there. That meant that the attack on the wagon, or wagons, was an event of only a few hours before. How far he must ride to come upon the battle scene, he could only guess. Indian sign was notoriously misleading at times; one day's travel to a small well-mounted scouting party might be fifty miles, to a tribe on the march, perhaps no more than ten.

He had ridden a full fifteen miles hugging the river on the north bank, when the sound of gunshots came faintly to his ears. And again, in a ragged fusillade that spoke of desperate defense.

The wagon folk were holding out!

AHEAD, whence came the sound of combat, small ravines fringed with cottonwood broke up the river bottom, and the man in buckskin swerved away from the stream to a level ridge that yet was hemmed in by tangled growth. He rode with increasing caution. Indian attackers might scorn to post watchers on their flanks, but a small detached party might well be seeking game or water, if the siege was thus prolonged.

The ridge showed no sign of life. But the firing grew louder. The ridge dipped again toward the river, into a small clearing.

And here the rider saw the originals of that grim picture on the talk bone.

Stretched on the trampled long-grass, sprawling where they had died, lay white men. Three he counted in a brief glance, a few yards from the heap of ashes that had once been a plains wagon.

Here, then, was the battle scene of the picture. Somehow the wagon party had fought clear of ambush, leaving their dead.

The man in buckskin gave only half a glance at the sprawling bodies. His eye was on the trail, and now he urged the sorrel forward, down the slope. The ground leveled out, and through a gap in the cottonwood he glimpsed the battle.

Old Thibeau's fort was in siege.

Dead and long gone, old Thibeau, yet his old stockade, reared two decades before on a stream shunned by plainsmen, now served an embattled band. A rude sanctuary this, built of felled logs sunk upright, side by side, in a great clear stretch of river bottom. High enough to repel attackers who might try to storm the walls from the saddle, stout enough to stop bullets, it stood as a monument to those hardy

spirits who roamed the wilderness by twos and threes, and cut a death-strewn path for those who came after them.

Hidden behind the cottonwood, the man in buckskin slipped from the saddle, jerked a deerhide thong from a saddle ring, and with deft quick fingers slipped a noose over the sorrel's nose. This was no moment for attacking redskins to be made aware of an advancing white by a horse's friendly nicker. Then he moved closer toward the gap in the brush and studied the stockade and the ground about.

The defenders numbered a score or more, he decided, as he watched the heads and rifle muzzles bobbing above the spike-topped logs of the stockade. Here and there a shot rang out, and flame winked from a gun barrel.

The Indians? Yes, a party there, on the far side of the great clearing, barely visible on the lip of a small ravine. And over on the right, away from the river, an arrow slanted through the air to fall inside the fort.

The woods where he crouched were clear of attackers, and the reason was clear. His vantage point was a long rifle shot from the fort, and far beyond arrow range. Nor was there any dip in the ground, on this side, to give cover to attackers.

On the fourth side, the ground fell away flatly to the river bank a hundred yards away. Redskins there would have been clear targets for the fort's rifles, and the sandy slope was bare of life.

The lone rider watched the cottonwoods and the lip of the ravine. There—a feather waving in the wind, a red cloth wound about a brave's forehead. And even as he sighted them, a derisive yell arose from the ravine, swallowed at once by a swelling chorus of warwhoops from ravine and cottonwoods.

With a shake of the head the man in buckskin listened and made his count.

Fully a hundred Cherokees besieged the old stockade.

II

SO the Cherokees were on the warpath! It was to be expected. The year before white men had taken a wagon train west and farther west, over the sacred hunting grounds of the plains tribes, and on through Apache country into New Mexico. For generations the redskins had tolerated the small bands of traders who gave them cloth and knives and firewater for their furs, but the rumble of the covered wagon had aroused their councils. The wagon wheel, rumbling a challenge for possession of the plains, was answered with the throb of the war drum and the shrieks of the warriors.

Cherokees. . . . Far from their accustomed haunts. They must be ranging afar for the first migration of the buffalo in the spring to the lower reaches of the rivers that ran to the Missouri and Mississippi. The seasonal march of the big herds on their way toward the long grass on the easterly plains.

Tense in the thicket, the man in buckskin crouched with eyes a-slit and jaw clenched tight. Off to the left, on the river side, he could see the stockade wall was pierced for entry and egress. The great door, crossbarred and spike-studded, evidently was well secured within. He eyed it with a fretful shake of the head. Should he make a dash for it?

He weighed the chances. Go in, toss his rifle into the balance—and maybe his life? Or take the back trail, six hours hard ride southwest to try to gather help for the besiegers?

His hand was out, reaching for the bridle rein, when the lurking redmen goaded him to a quick decision.

A wild whoop sounded from the cottonwoods. A chorus rose in savage reply. And with no more warning, mounted braves dashed from wood and ravine, brandishing feathered lances and bows, and an occasional musket.

Led by a tall chief on a snorting gray pony, the redskins darted toward the stockade, then suddenly wheeled to circle it. Muskets banged and arrows flew in a deadly stream toward the spike-topped walls.

Heads appeared above the wall, and the watcher caught his breath. The fools! Outnumbered—and trying to shoot it out in the open! Greenhorns, new to the plains, needing an old hand to show them. . . .

With his grasp for the rein the man in buckskin made his decision. Mounting, he eased the sorrel toward the gap in the cottonwood, watching for his chance.

It came in a twinkling. The Cherokees had circled the fort, leaving half a dozen dead in their wake. As quickly as they had dashed from their cover, they retired from sight. On the flat ground, between the rider and the stockade, the ponies of the slain ran aimlessly, wheeling uncertainly.

Into the midst of the snorting animals the rider spurred the sorrel. They fled at his coming, and he had raced halfway across the clearing toward the fort's gate before a savage yell of surprise and anger rose in the cottonwoods to the right. At once he raised his voice in a hail to the fort.

"Open up! In the fort, there, open up!"

A head poked up near the gate, disappeared almost at once. Then he was racing in the shadow of the stockade wall. A shot rang out to the right and a bullet whizzed past his head. Arrows flicked on the hard ground at his sorrel's flying forefeet. But those loose ponies had made his try good—the Cherokees, all eyes on the fort, had sighted him too late for their hastily aimed bullets and arrows.

On the water side of the stockade he pulled rein and hailed again with urgency. "Hi! Open up!"

BEHIND the great door timbers creaked. Suddenly the barrier swung back. Quickly he urged the sorrel through the scant opening and turned to watch the door swung shut again.

A lanky linsey-shirted backwoodsman, leaning a rifle against the wall, was dropping the great crossbar quickly into place.

"Thanks, friend," he addressed the gate-closer.

The lanky man retrieved his rifle, looked up and grinned. "Ye're welcome, stranger." He chuckled. "And right welcome, ye are, fer it's us that's needin' what help we kin git."

The rider nodded soberly, and swung from his saddle. "Where's the train captain?"

"Yonder." The lanky one pointed. "Name's Purdy."

The rider followed the pointing finger and noted a hatless, gray-haired man moving from the dubious shelter of a wagon set against the stockade wall. The train captain, eying the newcomer and the sorrel horse speculatively, was joined at that moment by a black-haired six-footer in a broad-brimmed hat, who appeared to share the leader's interest.

The object of their scrutiny led the sorrel to a sheltered spot between two wagons, tied him and eased the saddle girth, then turned his steps toward the train captain.

As he went, he cast swift glances about the stockade's interior, and his face grew bleak. The fort's assets were sadly mishandled for defense. Wagons lay helter-skelter, with gaunt horses rearing where they stood tied to wagon spokes. Dull-eyed oxen shuffled at other wagons. Horses and oxen lacked any protection from arrows from over the wall.

At the wall itself, men crouched at intervals on the narrow floorboards fastened to the logs by spiked joists. No attempt, seemingly, had been made to pierce the logs with loopholes for rifles, and the defenders had suffered by that neglect—for at one point under the wall, two men were carrying a limp form toward a nearby wagon.

Purdy and his companion advanced to meet the newcomer.

"Howdy, stranger," greeted the train captain. At close view his clear eyes met the gaze of the man in buckskin frankly. His garb was sober but clean and well cut, the fustian of a city merchant.

"Howdy." The man in buckskin took the proffered hand. "My name is Kent, John Kent. Saw you in trouble, and decided to come in and help, if possible."

"Right kind of ye," the train leader affirmed. "We kin do with help. My name's Purdy. This is Barth, our wagon boss."

Kent turned to face the black-haired man, and shook hands. Barth, of a height with Kent, gave him a straight, keen glance that fell to wander over the young plainsman's coonskin cap, fringed buckskin, and moccasins. Barth nodded silently. Kent returned the nod and swung back to Purdy.

"It looks bad for you. I'm free to tell you I know a deal about this country, and I'd like to show you how you can best fight these savages."

"Old-timer, hey?" Old Purdy screwed up his eyes and gave Kent a long stare. "Ye don't look so old, Kent."

Kent smiled. "Maybe not, but a few years in plains country can teach a man."

"Wal, now—" Purdy rubbed his chin.

"What d'ye make of it?" He questioned.

"It's a bad spot. You're on the Cimarron River—which is no river at all, only a few hot suns dry up that water there. But there is water now and you need plenty. Not only for yourself and the stock, but to soak your blankets and wagon tops. A blazing arrow dropped onto that cluster there—" he nodded toward a jumble of wagons—"would not only destroy your goods, it would stampede your stock, turn up your wagons and the fort itself, and force you out to face the Indians in the open."

OLD PURDY stared at the wagons, then nodded. "Yore right, Kent." He mopped sweat off his face with a huge bandanna. "I had a feelin' we wan't organized right fer this trip."

Kent asked curiously, "Where you headed?"

"Santy Fe," the old man answered proudly.

"No!" Kent shook his head incredulously. "Why, that's a hard trip for the best men on the plains. And I take it you're new to the country?"

"Yep. We—" An arrow whizzed through the air above their heads, and the old man flinched, straightening with a wry grin. "Let's git under." He led the way to a wagon and squirmed under it. Kent and Barth followed. "We're all from the Ohio country, 'cept Barth. He's be'n workin' out o' Missouri, north of th' Platte, some years."

The old man's eyes strayed to the wagons, and he waved a hand. "Thar's all we got in the world," he said simply.

"I see."

"An' ye think mebbe we bit off more'n we kin swaller, hey?"

Kent frowned. "It's a long hard trail. You're on the wrong river. And if you do beat these devils off, there'll be more—plenty more—between here and Santa Fe. But where there's a will, there's a way."

Barth, silent until now, said sardonically, "I guess you got a lot of ideas, Kent?"

"Several," Kent said bluntly. "You must get water. Then, you ought to lay those wagons out parallel to the wall, say ten feet from it, and cover that space and the wagons with the wagon canvas and blankets, and any such stuff as you have. Keep the covering wet, to guard against fire. Those Cherokees won't try fire while there's any chance of a quick finish, but they may get impatient."

Purdy nodded.

"Anything else?" asked Barth.

"Keep your men between the wall and the wagons. All the stock, too. And cut loopholes, just big enough for a rifle muzzle, so you won't have to show yourselves above the wall."

"That's clear," said Barth. "But you mentioned water?"

"Well, you might make a try for the river," Kent said slowly. "But it might cost lives. Better to put several men to work on a well. You ought to get good water in ten, fifteen feet. You'll need to timber the shaft—some of those footboards on the wall will do."

Purdy cheered up. "Water was worryin' me," he admitted. "But I kin see th' way, now. Anythin' else?"

Kent grinned. "Nothing, except shoot straight, and waste no ammunition. If your men stick to those rules, you'll do fine." A thought struck him. "How about food?"

Purdy and Barth exchanged a look. Both fell silent. At last Barth spoke. "Bad situation there. We're low on our salt meat. I'd hoped to find buffalo before this, and save on our supplies. But . . ." He forbore to finish.

Kent thought quickly. This outfit would perish, by all the signs. Should he tell them of their nearly certain fate? Shifting as he lay under the wagon bed, he thought—yes. Yes, tell them. Maybe they'd be stirred to such activity that the Cherokees, disgruntled, would depart and sate their blood lust on the buffalo.

III

WITHIN the stockade all was orderly. The watch on the walls was alert, but the rifles were silent. From over the wall, where the redskins were in ambush, no sound came.

He turned to Purdy, about to speak. But at that moment came an interruption that left the warning unspoken.

A billowing skirt came into sight beside the wagon, a bright blue skirt that swayed in the breeze to reveal small black shoes

and a trim pair of ankles in gray stockings. Then a face appeared—a girl's face, as she bent to peer under the wagon.

Kent stared. Purdy exclaimed, "Git in hyar Grace afore y' stop an arrer!"

The girl laughed, a merry, musical laugh that thrilled Kent to his toes. She stooped and stepped easily under the wagon bed, to sit at Kent's elbow.

"Well, dad," she exclaimed, "A council of war? You and Dave"—she looked at Barth with a hint of shyness—"and—Oh!" For the first time she looked direct at Kent.

"This is John Kent, Grace. My daughter, Kent."

"Howdy, ma'am." Kent brushed his coonskin cap from his head, and made as if to rise.

"Don't try to bow," she said, smiling. "This isn't the place for that."

Kent grinned feebly, the while his wonder grew. A girl—on the Cimarron! He turned troubled eyes on Purdy, and that oldster grew grave as he met the look and interpreted it. "Whar's yer mother, Grace?" he asked.

"Under the next wagon, Pa," she answered.

"Better go to her," the old man suggested. "We"—he indicated the two men and himself with an all-inclusive nod—"are gittin' out to git some things done."

The girl glanced sharply at him, but rose, head low, in compliance. She flashed one swift glance at Kent, then was gone from sight.

Kent's pent-up breath came in a long-drawn-out whistle. "Women—on the Cimarron?" he said harshly, and his face was bleak.

"My wife and daughter," said Purdy, eyeing Kent keenly. "Another trader has his wife along. It's bad, hey?"

Kent nodded slowly. "Yes, it's bad. You'd better get the work started—well, wagons, coverings, stock tethered, loopholes."

Purdy balanced on all fours. "Right now, hey, Barth? Kent, ef ye need water fer yer horse, ye'll find it over by that ox-wagon thar."

"Thanks." Kent rose to follow. "And I'll look around."

The two rounded the wagon, and Kent moved slowly back to his horse. This train was in bad shape. They'd never hold out. But if he could escape the Cherokee attackers and bring in his four companions off the trail. . . . Time enough to think of that when night fell, and a fighting chance of escape presented itself. He unsaddled the sorrel, stroked the sleek sweating hide, and found a shady spot to tether the horse.

AS he moved slowly along the wall, surveying the wagons and their equipment, he came upon the man who had opened the gate for him. The lanky rifleman was hunched over a wagon tongue, shaking percussion caps for his plains rifle from a box into a leather pouch. He looked up and recognized Kent.

"Well, friend," he greeted him, "Set a while."

Kent sat down beside him on the wagon tongue. "You're getting ready for more of it," he remarked.

"Yup. Reckon there'll be more." He eyed Kent shrewdly. "Whar from, friend?"

"From Santa Fe."

"Sho! Comin' out, hey? And we a-goin' in. . . . Mebbe." He shot a look at the top of the stockade, and shook his head. "How do they call ye?"

"Kent. John Kent."

The lanky man looked up quickly. "Kent? Heard tell of a John Kent. Got th'owed in jail, down to Santy Fe."

"That's me."

"Sho, now! How do they treat ye, them Spaniards?"

"Not so badly, sometimes," Kent grinned. "And they're Mexicans now, you know, not Spaniards, since the colonies out this side the ocean decided to thumb their noses at King Ferdinand."

"So they are, so they are. My name's Farr. Glad to see ye. This outfit had a guide, a talky Mexican, but he quit us while we was a-crossin' the Arkansas. So ye kin give us plenty help on what's ahead."

"Do my best."

"Wal, I'll be gittin' back t' th' wall." Farr rose, rifle in hand, and started to cross the enclosure to the far side of the stockade. Kent shouted as he saw Farr's course.

But it was too late. An arrow, zipping over the near wall, buried itself in Farr's shoulder with a sickening *thuck*. Farr fell,

knocked off balance by the force of the blow and the surprise of it.

Kent ran forward, picked the lanky one up in his arms and bore him back to the shelter of the wagon. At the same instant a plump woman, face half hidden under a poke bonnet, figure swathed in blue-gray calico bodice and skirt, scuttled to his side from somewhere nearby. In her hand she bore a roll of cloth. "You're hurt, Farr!" she exclaimed. "Is it bad?"

Farr grinned wryly as Kent sat him down on the wagon tongue he had quitted a moment before. "Might be worse," he grunted. "Sho! I plumb fergot a arrer c'n shoot on a bend—not straight like a honest rifle." He bared his shoulder, and nodded at Kent. "This young feller's outa Santy Fe, Ma Purdy. His name's Kent."

The woman, applying a strip of white linen to the arrow wound, looked up quickly. "From Santy Fe, now! Think o' that!"

Farr flashed a wicked grin at Kent, and said casually, "Yup. He was in jail down thar!"

"Land sakes!" The woman stared at Kent, her bandage forgotten. "Not this young man, shorely. Can't be true."

"It's true, ma'am," Kent assured her.

The woman's smile died away. "Hmmm," she said, than finished the bandage in silence.

"It don't signify nothin'," Farr cut in hastily. "Plenty good men been in jails. Hey, Kent?" But Mrs. Purdy, with a brief nod to Kent and a final pat to smooth the bandage, re-rolled the cloths and walked away.

"That's a woman fer ye," Farr confided. "She's mighty fine, but—well, a mite too law-abidin'." He shook his head. "Shucks, jail, now! What do women know about politics?"

Kent grinned, but his glance followed her as she disappeared under a wagon. Then—"I still can't get over it. Women—on the Cimarron!"

The lanky backwoodsman nodded vigorously. "I was agin it," he assured Kent. "So was some of the others. But old Purdy reckoned the trail was wide open. He's captain of the train. Though there's times when it seems Barth has the say."

"Barth's had plains experience, north of the Platte, Purdy tells me."

"Yup. How much, I don't guess to rightly know."

"Not enough, I'm afraid." Kent's eyes had strayed to the line of wagon's again, and he rose with a half-curse of vexation. Across the enclosure wagoners were leisurely hitching stock to an isolated wagon, evidently intending to carry out Kent's tactics, ordered by Purdy and Barth of aligning the wagons nearer the wall. He strode down the wagon line, and bumped into Barth.

"LOOK here," he said bluntly. "This is going too slow. You should have all those wagons lined up, stock tied, and coverings wet down, before dark. At this rate, you'll never make it."

Barth eyed him sharply. "Take it easy, Kent," he retorted.

"Take it easy? Do you think you'll take it easy if those Cherokees toss a few flaming arrows in here tonight?" He ground the heel of a boot into the dust. "Why, if this . . ."

He stopped abruptly as his angry glance came to rest upon the intent face of Grace Purdy, who sat under the nearest wagon. Barth, about to make angry reply, followed Kent's glance and choked down the words he was about to utter. Turning to face Kent, he spoke then quietly, though a throbbing vein at the base of his throat belied his calm speech.

"We'll do what's necessary, Kent," he said evenly. "And don't forget I'm bossing these wagons. We're glad to have help, and your jail record in Santa Fe doesn't bother me." His eyes gleamed for a moment with malice, but his tone was polite. "Now I'll be getting along to speed up the shift."

Kent was left standing there, feeling oddly at a loss. He hesitated to risk a glance at Grace Purdy. But she called to him.

"Sit down a moment, Mr. Kent."

Obediently he crawled under the shelter, flushing as he sat near her. She surveyed him gravely.

"What are we to do, with the Indians here?" she asked.

"Fight them off," he returned promptly, "as often as they come. Finally, if we kill a sufficient number to discourage them, they'll pull out."

"It's as easy as that?" she cried, in plain relief.

Kent lowered his head. How could he tell her? Perhaps the wagon train could find its way out of this trap—but the chances were slight indeed. He looked away from her and spoke slowly. "It would be better, of course," he said diffidently, "if there were a few experienced men in the train."

"Mr. Barth is experienced with plains travel," she pointed out.

He shook his head. "I doubt if he has the ability to take this train into New Mexico," he said flatly.

"Don't you think so?" She twisted a bodice ribbon in her fingers. "Mr. Barth —you may as well know it—has honored me very greatly by asking me to marry him."

"What?" Kent sat up. "You?" He stared into her face, slowly flushed under the straight look which she gave him, and avoided her eyes. "I didn't know, of course."

"No." She said no more. He sat for a moment, then with a stiff "Excuse me," moved from shelter. Down the line he went until he came to the Farr wagon. The wounded woodsman was sitting in the shade of the wall, watching as two neighbors harnessed his horses preparatory to pulling the ungainly wagon into the defense line.

"I'll take a hand, if you like," he called, and one said, "Fine. That gives me time to start my own rig." Off he went, and Kent aided the remaining man with the team.

Down the wagon line the stock was working, backing the heavy trade wagons toward the wall. Horses whinnied, oxen bawled, and the cumbersome shrouded vehicles slowly fell into formation. Once in line, the stock was gathered at one end of the line, while fires were started at the other end for the evening meal. One wagon stood alone, and behind it two men plied spades. The digging of the well was begun.

Kent, laboring with this wagon and that, once glanced at the wall, and saw the watching riflemen busy boring loopholes. He nodded grimly. The preparations were in force. Now if the leadership stood the test. . . .

IV

PURDY puffed on his after-supper pipe and spoke slowly. "Y' think that was a mistake, Kent?"

"Mistake? It was lunacy." There was a biting vehemence in Kent's tone. "Women—in this country? Haven't you seen enough to convince you? How about those Cherokees? They're quiet now, yes, but how about the next attack? And the next?"

The old man passed a hand over his chin in confusion, shooting a sidelong glance at Barth. The three were alone at the camp fire under the awning that stretched from wall to wagon. Barth had spoken little since the meal. Above, the sky grew steadily darker. Stars appeared, all the brighter for the absence of any moon.

Suddenly Barth spoke curtly. "Becknell came through."

"Yes, Becknell came through." Kent held his voice down. "But he had no women along. He had no men who weren't wise to redskin ways, and able to hunt—and find—fresh meat."

"It seemed like a good move." Purdy was chastened. "We heard about Cap'n Becknell, and the good prices goin' in Santy Fe fer goods. My women wanted to come along, and Barth wan't agin it. Ye see, Barth and my daughter's plannin' t' marry."

"I see." Kent's tone was impersonal. "It's great country, and it needs women to help build it up. But I think the time has yet to come for them to move in."

"Injuns?" Purdy inquired.

"For one thing. Then, at the end of the trail, there may be a different feeling any time. Mexico and the United States are at loggerheads on the boundary, and boundary troubles make war. Santa Fe might not be a peaceable place."

"Sho!" Purdy stiffened. "Hadn't thought o' that."

Barth, too, sat up. "How do they act with Americans down there, Kent?" he asked.

"Depends on who's governor," Kent replied evenly. "If it's some thieving fool whose only interest is the tax he can slap on American wagons, he doesn't take the trouble to keep on good terms with traders. Just now, there's a good man in office."

"So we'll git a good reception, hey?"

"Yes. If this train can go through the Cherokees, and the Comanches farther along."

"If?" Barth spoke up. "You ain't sure?"

KENT stared into the fire. "I've been in there twice," he said finally. "Once before Becknell—but not with wagons. Pack horses. And again just after Becknell's wagons. Pack horses again."

"And now you're comin' out?" Barth put it as a question.

"Headin' for Independence," Kent explained, tersely.

"How'd you go in?"

"First trip, along the Arkansas out of Missouri," Kent told Barth. "Last fall, went the same way, but started too late and had to stay in Santa Fe until the thaw. So the out trip is along the Canadian."

"Why's thet?" Purdy asked.

"Forage shoots up earlier in the spring than along the Arkansas. Makes an earlier trip possible."

"Sa-ay!" Purdy exclaimed. "Thet oughta be our way, Barth! Here we started quick, to be first train inter Santy Fe and git top prices!" He turned to Kent. "We cain't make it this route?"

Kent shook his head. "No water, after a month's going. No grass. You're on the wrong river."

Barth grunted, and his voice grated with hostility for the first time since the flare-up in the afternoon. "We like *this* river, Kent, and we'll stay with it. There's grass here, and water. You can see that." He gestured derisively, and grinned at Purdy.

"Yes, you can see that." Kent held himself in check. If he could save this train from certain destruction upriver, it was his duty, however unpleasant. "But you should remember you're in the Arkansas valley. Once away, and up the Cimarron, you'd discover why the trappers call it Salt River."

"How's thet?" This from Purdy.

"You know the old saying, 'Up Salt Creek without a paddle'? Well, this is Salt Creek, and you'd have no use for a paddle once the summer sun dries up the stream, and the only water in the bed is many feet below the sand."

Purdy appeared torn between two impulses. Kent, watching him, despaired of overthrowing Barth's influence. But why was Barth so intent upon a route shunned by plainsmen as a sure path to death by starvation?

V

WITH a nod to the two at the fire, Kent rose and paced restlessly in the dusk along the wagon line. He paused at the end, heard the clink of spade on shale farther along, and strolled over to the well-diggers. As he neared the wagon that shielded their labors a shadow detached itself from the vague shape of the prairie schooner. It was Grace Purdy. She stood poised in the night breeze, which whipped her balloon sleeves close to her shapely arms and flung full bodice and skirts so that they clung and revealed her trim but wholly feminine figure. Kent caught his breath, and halted a few paces away.

She spoke softly. "It's a lovely night. Quiet, and peaceful." Moved to a quick smile by her own words, she cast an apprehensive glance toward the nearby wall. "It *should* be peaceful," she amended.

"Yes," agreed Kent. "It's a big country, big enough for everybody. It should be peaceful."

"How long have you known it?"

"Two years, out this far."

"You've been to Santa Fe?"

"Twice." Kent's pulses hammered with the nearness of this vision. He found it increasingly difficult to reply to her frank questions. But she continued.

"What's it like, farther west?"

"It changes, as one goes west and south." With his eyes fixed on the shadowy figures of the sentries on the wall, Kent warmed to his subject. "From here, on the Arkansas or on the Canadian, it's long grass a-plenty for a way. Cottonwood and alder. Three weeks' travel, it goes into buffalo grass—that's short grass, and sprouts later as the snows run off. Then as you get off toward the southwest, turning for Santa Fe, it's desert, with fewer creeks. Country gets rough, rocky and full of gorges. Takes a day to cover five miles, on some of those stretches." He paused, confused as he realized what a long speech he had made.

"And then?" she prompted.

Kent grinned. "And then," he said, "you stand at the top of a slope—and down there's Santa Fe. Trail's end."

"Trail's end!" She was silent for a moment. "Or is it—just the beginning?" She turned and met his questioning look, and her eyes were shining with a strange light. "Perhaps—oh, perhaps, it may be just the beginning of the trail!" For a fleeting second she laid her hand lightly on his arm. Then with a rustle of skirts she was gone, into the dusk.

FOR many minutes John Kent stood motionless, staring with unseeing eyes at the ragged line of the wall against the darkening sky. With a jerk he came to a realization of his surroundings. Casting a glance about the dusk-shrouded enclosure, he walked toward the entrance, avoiding the flickering camp fires at which were gathered men and women whose low-toned discussions came to him as a distant hum.

At the wagon nearest the gate he found Farr, sitting alone, wounded shoulder carefully rested against a folded blanket, pipe glowing in the dusk. He sank down beside the woodsman, pulled a pipe from his pocket.

"How's the shoulder?" he asked.

"Stiff," grunted Farr. "Stiff an' sore. How's the fort?'

"Ought to do better," Kent assured him, though his own mind questioned the statement. "Once the well is in everything'll be in shape."

"Ye hain't seen Ma Purdy again?" queried Farr amusedly.

Kent laughed. "No."

"Wal, she wouldn't be lookin' after a jailbird like you." Farr chuckled. "Women never kin understand the simplest thing. Spaniards had me in jail down in Nawluns, twenty-odd year ago, fer no other reason than I was tryin' t' do some honest tradin'. Back in Saint Jo, could I explain thet? Not me. To all the women, and some o' th' church-goin' men, I was a scoundrel downright. You gotta put up with it, Kent."

Kent grinned. "I reckon I can. I've driven mules."

"Mules?" Farr looked up interestedly. "What's thet?"

"Cross—half jackass and half horse," Kent told him.

Farr snorted. "Tarnation! Ye hain't foolin'—no, seems like I heard tell o' sech a animal. Hard to handle, hey?"

"Contrary," Kent informed him.

"Good fer nothin'?"

"Oh, they're mighty good. Fine for desert country. They'll go twice as far as horses, on half the water and fodder."

"Hmmm. Mebbe this outfit could do with some. Notice our stock? Gittin' mighty peaked."

"Yes." Kent spoke soberly. He debated whether to reveal to Farr the details of his camp a few hours' ride away. And while he hesitated, a yell from the stockade wall roused the whole train.

VI

KENT, facing the open space in the center of the enclosure, was the first to see the flaming arrow. Its head was buried in the dirt, the flaming bit of cloth at the base of the flint lighting the shaft and feather. He raced to pluck it from the ground, then ran back to the shelter of the wagons, where men and women clustered, alarmed and lively, shouting eager questions. Kent, with Farr trudging after him, carried the arrow to the fire where Purdy and Barth sat. With a stick seized from beside the fire he flicked the flaming cloth away, then studied the singed shaft.

It was a straight dogwood withe, flint spike bound to the business end with deer-gut, and a black feather at the other end. Kent's eyes narrowed in speculation.

From the wall, sentries were shouting reassuring reports to Purdy and Barth. "Nary sign o' th' critters!" yelled one. "Jest the one arrer, outa that woods!"

Purdy acknowledged the reports and turned to Kent. He took the arrow and studied it with puzzlement. "Don't seem to make sense," he commented. "Jest one arrer? Why not a swarm of 'em?"

Kent shook his head. Puzzled himself, he watched Barth take the shaft from Purdy's hands. And suddenly Kent's roving glance fixed itself on Barth's intent study of the blackened stick. He saw Barth straighten, eyes agleam. The wagon boss caught Kent's eye upon him, and his eyes filmed. With a shrug he tossed the arrow under the near wagon.

Purdy, Farr and others nearby still

voiced their bewilderment. "Sho!" exclaimed Farr. "It don't make sense. What d'you make of it, Kent?"

"May be just a stunt to scare us," Kent suggested. "Indians like those tricks." But to himself he scouted the thought that the arrow was a threat. More likely, he thought, it might be a message—to someone in the stockade.

Into his mind came the picture of Barth, his eyes gleaming as he stood with the arrow in his hands.

The resolution that he had formed earlier, the girl's soft touch still warm on his hand, returned with new force. The train was safe for the moment, probably for the night.

He spoke tersely to Purdy. "You ought to keep a careful watch during the night. Those devils might try to heap dry brush against the outer side of the wall, then fire it with flame arrows by daylight. You haven't enough water to fight fire, if they sneak in." Without waiting for a reply he turned away.

Farr followed him. When they stood alone, Farr spoke low. "Kent, jest what did ye make o' thet arrer?"

For a moment Kent hesitated. "Farr, did you ever know of Barth—or for that matter anyone else in this train—dealing with Pawnees?"

"Pawnees?" Farr's eyes widened. "Jupiter, no! Fur as I see, the only way to deal with a Pawnee is with a rifle. An' why d'ye ask?"

"Better keep this between your teeth, Farr." As the woodsman nodded somberly, Kent went on. "I'm thinking that arrow may have been a message—for someone in the stockade. And it wasn't Cherokee feathering. It was Pawnee."

"Sho!" Farr absently stroked his bandaged shoulder. "Somethin' like thet, hey?" He shook his head.

KENT thought of that little clearing farther down the Cimarron—the scene that the talk bone had chronicled. "How many men have you lost along here?"

"Since the Cherokees hit us? Seven, back on the trail. Three men hit by arrers here, one purty bad. An' three horses."

"What's the train worth?"

"They's forty thousand dollars laid inta them wagons," Farr answered with a note of pride in his voice.

"Hmmm. D'you know what the goods might bring in Santa Fe?"

"Three-four times thet much, I reckon."

"Better than that." Kent nodded in response to the lanky woodsman's questioning stare. "You might pass that word around tomorrow—it might stir these folks up to make a hard fight."

Farr squinted quizzically at Kent. "Sounds like you don't aim t' be around here tomorrow."

"I don't." With a jerk of his thumb Kent gestured to the shadowed spot where the sorrel stood, munching a wisp of long grass from the stockade's scanty store. Picking up blanket and saddle, Kent explained, "I'm pulling out."

Farr silently watched the saddling of the sorrel. "Ye want I should open the gate fer ye?" he asked finally.

"That's it," Kent said briskly.

Farr eyed the young plainsman a long moment. Finally, "Wal, they's others here will feel diff'rent. But I reckon ye know what ye're doin', Kent. So here's my hand, and good luck."

"Thanks." Kent took the woodsman's hand, then untied the sorrel and led the horse toward the gate, Farr alongside. In the dark, with only the starlight to illumine the night, their shadows were black against the blacker wall. Farr cautiously raised the heavy bar on the gate, swung the barrier inward a few feet, raised a hand. Kent mounted, waved a reply, and laid a heel to the sorrel's flank.

He turned the horse toward the river. The watchers on the wall would be less vigilant, and he hoped to ride clear without an outcry. More important, the redmen would have less chance of intercepting him—the sand between stockade and river deadened the sound of the horse's footfalls. He held the sorrel to a slow walk.

But the stars betrayed him. The sheen on the muddy river must have momentarily outlined the dim figures of horse and rider. For on the wall a shout rose. A rifle barked.

Wheeling sharply to the left, Kent spurred the sorrel. The big horse catapulted into the gloom down-river. In a few moments Kent had reached the screen

of cottonwoods from which he had first sighted the stockade.

Far in the distance a war-whoop rose. Then an answering call. Then silence.

No more shooting came from the stockade. Kent could imagine the scene there. A hurried council, and Farr's tale of Kent's departure. His jaw set. Peering along the dim trail, he drove the sorrel hard.

VII

THE five men sat in the chilly dawn, huddling close to the fire. For a moment none spoke.

"That's the way of it," Kent broke the short silence. "They can't last out for long."

Deaf Yoakum bit off a huge mouthful of plug and grunted dryly:

"An' ye take it we kin help 'em fight off the varmints?"

Kent nodded.

The stocky dark-haired youth on his left grinned. "She's a fonny thing," he remarked. "Captain Johnnee goes to find some wan to buy mules, and finds these train. These train will maybe buy our mules, no?"

"Maybe, Pierre. They will if they're wise."

Pierre Lebrun turned to the pair of mule-drivers across the fire. "W'at you t'ink, you two, huh?"

"It's up to the Cap'n," drawled the lean, leather-shirted driver. His companion nodded agreement.

"Wal, then, it's settled," Yoakum barked the verdict. "We'll break camp an' git started. Ought to find 'em soon enough."

"There's something I forgot to mention," Kent spoke up. "After the Cherokees had attacked, a lone Indian shot an arrow into the stockade, then skedaddled. It was a Pawnee arrow."

Yoakum squinted steadily. "Fust the Cherokees attackin', then a Pawnee arrer flies in." He shook his head.

Kent pointed his fork at his older partner. "Deefy, you've seen a good many outfits—trapping, trading and gold hunting—sold out to the Indians by whites or breeds for a share of the loot. I can't help thinking the wagon boss of this Ohio train may be cahootin' with the Cherokees."

"Might be," conceded the old scout.

"Ever hear of a man named Barth this side the Missouri?"

"Barth?" Yoakum said, squinting at the young plainsman. "Big? Black-haired? Cold eye?"

"Sounds right. What do you know, Deefy?"

Yoakum pondered. "It's three, four year since I saw him. North of Leavenworth. Tryin' to fit out for a trip up the Platte. Lookin' fer gold. Claimed to know somethin' about a rich field. Hain't seen him since. Come to think of it, they was tales up the Missouri that Cap'n Zeb Pike found gold in the Platte headwaters, and would have gone back to stake it. Dunno. . . . I was with Pike fer two months, to the day an' hour he died in the attack on York in Canady, an' he never chirped a word o' gold. But thet's the story. Could be, Barth knows whar gold is."

Kent studied that. "He has one wagon in the train."

Yoakum cocked an eye at his younger companion. "An' yuh figger he might desert the train, mebbe stealin' a couple extry wagons, to fit out in Santy Fe fer the Platte?"

"Question is," Kent said, "what's Barth's intentions respecting this train?"

"Nary bit of good, I reckon," said Yoakum. "Anyhow, we can drop in on 'em, mebbe sell 'em our mules or swap 'em for horses."

Pierre Lebrun spoke up, grinning widely. "Me, I say sell these mule ver' soon. Ah, these mule! A horse, you spur. These ox, you stab. But these mule, you talk, you push, you kick, and these mule must linger. Ah! To sell? But yes!"

Yoakum laughed dryly. "Dunno's we all feel the same, Pierre. They're right on-plausible critters." He turned to Kent. "When you reckon we can locate this yere train?"

"Noon tomorrow, I reckon," Kent replied. "Unless the Indians get to 'em first."

BUT the wagon train was still holding out. As the five reached the wooded ridge above the Cimarron under a blazing noon sun, they pulled up short. Rifle volleys smote their ears.

Yoakum swung quickly in his saddle. "They're at it! Now's our time! A rifle

an' pistol apiece'll do a power o' harm to them pesky devils!"

"We'd best swing wide to the right," Kent cautioned them. "We can find good cover, spread out and let the Cherokees think we're ten times five."

He led the way off the ridge into dense cottonwood growth, down into a deep ravine, and back riverward as the firing sounded now directly to the left. Tethering the horses and mules, the five made their way to a knoll that commanded a view of the whole clearing.

The stockade was the center of a frenzied fight. Painted Cherokees raced madly about the old fort, circling with precision as they shot with bow or musket from the backs of their snorting ponies. The fire from the fort was feeble.

Kent shook his head at Yoakum. "Running short of ammunition."

"Yup. Le's pick us a Injun apiece, and drap five to once. Thet'll give th' devils somethin' t' think on."

The five took cover. Aiming their long rifles with care, they fired almost as one. Three Cherokees slipped from their charging mounts. A fourth swayed and slowly toppled. The fifth wheeled his horse and made for the woods, bowed over the pony's withers.

The tribesmen had halted their wild charge about the stockade. And as they stood, seeking this new force, the five rifles barked again. Yells rose from the dust-veiled clearing, and the infuriated Cherokees quickly massed to charge the knoll.

The five had loaded swiftly. The St. Louis guns crashed out in another volley. Before their eyes, painted warriors tumbled from onrushing ponies. A horse reared in the front line of the charging braves, and collapsed, a bullet through its head.

But the wild rush came on. Desperately the five grasped their long pistols. Across the few yards that separated whites and redskins the deadly bullets flew true to the mark.

Kent and Yoakum had chosen their ground well. Before the knoll lay a small ravine, hidden from the Cherokee view, and as the rush reached the ravine, ponies plunged headlong into the depression. The charge halted in a whirl of milling ponies and raging, whooping braves afoot and ahorse.

As the braves dashed to right and left of the ravine, and wheeled to crush the little group of riflemen in their converging charge, Kent pulled out his tomahawk, shouting, "Watch the flank!" Yoakum swung to face the rush on one side. The other three loaded and swung toward the other end of the knoll. Pierre cried once, and toppled over.

Rifles barked at close range. Then pistols. And it was over.

Kent raised from his prone position in the strange silence that followed the mêlée. Down the slope, fleeing Cherokees were vanishing behind a cottonwood clump. Elsewhere there was no sign of the tribesmen.

"Guess it's over, Deefy," he called.

"Yup." The old scout looked up from two still forms on the ground. "It's all over fer these two." He pointed. An arrow had pierced the eye of the lean leather-shirted mule-driver. A bullet had torn a great hole in the bare chest of the man beside him.

Pierre Lebrun was sitting up, a hand gingerly touching his forehead.

"Hurt, Pierre?" Kent asked. He bent quickly, and nodded in relief when he saw that a bloody furrow was no more than a slight scalp wound.

The three looked toward the stockade.

VIII

PURDY greeted the three with unconcealed warmth. "Kent, reckon we had ye wrong when ye left us last night. Ye done the right thing, and we're shore grateful. What kin we do?"

Kent grinned. "Want to buy some mules? Good critters. Just the animal for the trail. We're bringing a herd up from New Mexico. Mark my word, within a year or two all Missouri will know 'em."

"Hmmm. . . . These yer friends?"

"My partners. Yoakum and Lebrun."

"Ye look like old hands at this plains game," Purdy suggested.

Kent answered. "Yoakum served in the war in Canada, with Captain Zebulon Pike. You remember Pike's military mission to survey the country—and how he was more or less arrested by the Spanish Governor?"

Purdy nodded, then suddenly grinned widely. "They even arrest American Army officers, hey, Kent?"

"That's right. And Pierre, here, got worse than that. He not only had a taste of jail, but they took his outfit away from him. Frenchmen weren't popular in New Mexico a few years ago—still aren't, now that Mexico has declared itself independent of Spain and France is backing King Ferdinand to get his colonies in this hemisphere back for him.

"That's a part of the picture that will help you to understand the reception this wagon train will find in Santa Fe—if it ever gets there."

Purdy turned troubledly from Kent to the other two. "How do you figger it, Yoakum?"

"Suicide—and murder," the old scout replied bluntly. "Suicide for you, and you'll be jest the same as murderin' yore wimmen." He stared, and coughed in embarrassment as the cover of the prairie schooner lifted and Ma Purdy, the girl Grace beside her, stood behind the train captain.

Purdy rubbed his stub of a beard. "Oh, Barth!" he called. A low voice answered near at hand, and the wagon boss stepped forward. Purdy spoke with a firmer tone than he had employed before. "Barth, I'm proposin' we make a halt here and talk this route trouble over with Kent here and his partners. Seems like we're mighty lucky to have these men, knowin' the country, ready and willin' to give us their learnin'."

Barth stared at Kent, then at Yoakum and Lebrun. Apparently on the point of voicing objection, he hesitated, then nodded. "I'll go around and pass the word," he agreed without emotion, and turned back.

Yoakum had been studying the wagons. Turning to Purdy, he asked, "How do you form fer camp?"

"Square."

The scout shook his head. "Small train like this, best way is an oval. Ye git formed quick, which is some help, especial when the pesky redskins are a-gallopin' over the hill all set to pour in the arrers and bullets. Then, breakin' camp, ye kin pull out quicker, which saves time and makes a day's journey longer."

"Oval, hey?" Purdy was puzzled. "Never saw it."

"I'll show ye." Yoakum walked his horse beside Purdy's leaders as the train captain drove forward to form camp. He set the wagon at an angle, the tongue turned in. Then he dircted Purdy to lead the second wagon also at an angle, with the fore left wheel close behind the right rear wheel of the first wagon. The third took the same relative position. The fourth, fifth and sixth wagons slanted at right angles to the lead three, the six thus having the shape of a bow. All the other wagons had held back, watching this novel maneuver. Now Yoakum directed them to form on the right in similar fashion.

"THAR, ye see," he explained to Purdy, "ye've got yer two strings makin' an aig, with a hole at each end to drive the stock out and in. Better than a circle fer a small train, 'cause ye got no space between wagons fer arrers to pop in on ye. Quicker to git in, an' quicker to git out—and time's a big thing when the redskins are comin' to lift yer ha'r."

"Yep," Purdy marveled, "that's right smart. Speakin' for myself, I'd like to see yuh along with this train."

Yoakum cast a sidelong glance at him. "Might be done," he murmured dubiously. He caught Kent's eye, and the younger man strolled over. "Cap," said Yoakum, "this outfit's haltin' fer a pow-wow. Would it be a good idee fer us to bring up them mules?"

"Best thing," Kent agreed. "Pierre and I'll go while you two talk things over." He signaled Lebrun and mounted.

Purdy watched the two riders loping along the back track. "You called him 'Cap' jest now," he remarked to Yoakum.

"And a captain he is. Was, leastways," the scout replied. Commanded a company, fightin' the British up around Niagara ten year ago, and him jest a boy then."

"Barth heard he was a trouble-maker," Purdy murmured.

"And a trouble-maker he is—fer hostile Injuns and sech." Yoakum spoke warmly. "A good friend to decent men, howsoever."

"These jailin's, now." Purdy spoke reflectively. "Seems they's politics behind a lot of it."

"Politics, sometimes," agreed Yoakum. "But sometimes it's jest plain thievery. All depends on how honest ye find the officials in Spanish country. Thet's to say, Mexican country now. Cap'n Johnny was in jail in Santa Fe—but not for murder, er thievin' er sech. He had a pack of goods and sold 'em. Then the Governor decides he should ha' made Johnny pay a tax. Johnny doesn't like the idee, and the Governor jails him."

"Aha!" Purdy grinned wryly. "So that was it! . . . But say now!" He scowled as a new thought struck him. "Mebbe they'll tax us purty heavy."

The scout shook his head. "'Tain't likely. That was two year agone, an' things has changed. The Mexicans is beginnin' to understand that their best friend against that tyrannious ol' Spanish King is these U-nited States of America. Yes, sir! There'll be a tax, prob'ly, but no jailin's."

Yoakum, intent on his expounding of the political world, had forgotten the women. Now he started as Grace Purdy spoke.

"Mr. Yoakum," she said, "what are the wimmen like in Santa Fe?"

The scout stared. "Wimmen, mum? Wal, now . . . why, now, yes, they's plenty Mex wimmen. Mostly fat, with a swarm of babies. I'd venture to say, mum, that wimmen don't count so much in New Mexico. Leastways, Mex wimmen," he added hastily. "You don't figger to settle in Santy Fe, shorely?"

"Oh, mercy, no," Grace laughed. "But we—Mother and I—felt we might help with the trading, perhaps finding Mexican goods that a man might overlook, but that would be easy to sell once we get back to Missouri."

"Yer goin' back to Missouri, then."

"Yes. And then, when we can, we'll choose a good farm—ranch, you call it out here—and settle down."

"Hmmm." The scout eyed her dubiously. "You like this frontier country?"

"Of course. It's so big. It's America growing up, building! And we want to help build." Her eyes flashed.

Yoakum chuckled. "I admire yer spunk, mum. Ye look like the buildin' kind. Jest two things ye need."

"And what are they?" she asked with a merry smile.

"The fust," he said, "is a ready trigger finger." And when she nodded, "The second is a good man fer a husband."

"Oh!" The girl colored, and her glance fell. The scout noted the blush, and nodded. He had thought it might be something like this.

IX

DUSK fell on a camp divided. Purdy had put the question to the assembled company: Cimarron, or Canadian? Purdy had spoken out for the Canadian, with the Kent mules, and the added services of Kent, Yoakum and Lebrun as guides. Farr had backed the Purdy move.

But Barth held strongly for the Cimarron route, and drew a good half of the camp to his argument that a shift to the south might lose them the golden advantage of being the first American wagon train of the year into Santa Fe, and therefore in line for the highest prices of the year.

The night meal was finished with the argument enduring. Old Yoakum shook his head in disgust, and turned his back on the debaters. Pierre listened with impish delight. Kent saw a chance to leave the main circle, and strolled toward the opening at the rear of the train. Looking at the sky for clouds, he all but collided with Grace Purdy as she leaned against the rearmost wagon bed.

Confused, he made a move to retrace his steps. But she spoke, halting him.

"So you're really a captain?"

In the dusk Kent tried in vain to study her face for a smile of friendliness—or perhaps a smile of mockery. "Not any more," he answered lightly. "War's over, so far as a man can see. I'm just a trader now."

"First an army officer, now a trader. What next?" she asked, her face tilted toward him in the half-light as if she awaited his answer eagerly.

Kent chuckled. "It's a big country," he said. "At times I've thought of hunting gold, other times I've thought I'd like to have a cattle ranch—out here where land is fertile and, of course, cheap. It won't always be cheap."

"No," she agreed. "That's why father brought us out so soon after the trail opened. He wanted us to see the country,

and help him to choose a ranch for ourselves."

"You—a ranch?" he exclaimed.

"Why not?" she countered. "There's work for a woman on a ranch."

Kent nodded, his picture of the future a rosier one than it had ever appeared. "That's true." He turned toward her impulsively, and for a moment her eyes met his. Then she turned away.

Clumsily, he shifted on his feet, his gaze wandering out through the gap between the wagons to the shadows surrounding the camp. Suddenly he gave a low, almost soundless, whistle, and stared fixedly into the dusk.

The girl laid a hand timidly on his arm. He thrilled to the touch, but gave her no heed. "What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know. I thought I saw a figure moving out there." He clasped her hand in both his own and urged her into the enclosure. "Go find Yoakum, and tell him. No need to alarm the camp—it may be only a curious antelope, or even nothing at all."

"Or even an Indian?" Her eyes were wide with alarm, but her hand was steady.

"Well, yes. You might tell Yoakum it might be a lone Pawnee."

"Yes." She whirled, and Kent heard the swish of her skirts and the quick patter of her running steps. He moved slowly out into the night, rifle cradled easily in his arms.

THE ground was uneven, and the presence of an occasional pebble forced Kent to walk warily. A slight sound would warn any lurking redskin. But the ridges gave him cover as he moved, scouting each depression before venturing into it.

He was crouched, motionless, on the lip of a little gully when he heard voices. He moved stealthily forward.

Two black shapes showed against the dark side of the gully. And Kent caught a softly spoken word:

"Comancheros."

Then a familiar voice in reply said: "At the upper spring."

It was Barth.

Kent cocked his rifle, and in the strained silence that followed the click of the hammer he spoke evenly. "Better come back to camp, Barth—and bring your friend with you." With the last word he noiselessly stretched prone on the ground.

Just in time. As he stretched flat, something whistled above his head. Kent grinned mirthlessly, for the familiar sound of an arrow's passing told him who Barth's friend might be.

Then flame spat at Kent, and the bark of a rifle sounded loud in his ears. He fired at the flash, and heard a grunt of pain. Silence, then. And off in the distance a pebble rolled on rain-soaked sand. The redskin was on his way.

From the camp came a hail. Kent shouted in reply, "Bring a torch!"

Instantly another voice cut in, nearby. "Thet you, Johnny?"

"Here, Deefy," Kent called. "It's Barth. I've dusted him, I think. The Indian got away."

Yoakum snorted. "So thet's it." He glided closer. "Shore Barth's fangs are pulled?"

"Most likely. He had only the one shot. And I doubt if he could load up now."

Farr came running up with a brand from the campfire. The flickering light showed Barth leaning on his rifle, cradling his right elbow in his left palm.

Purdy came up, grim and alert. "You, Barth? And Kent, hey? Well? Let's have it!"

Barth was silent. Kent spoke. "I was at the opening of the wagon line, and thought I saw something out here. I came out, and heard a strange voice say, 'Comancheros.' Then Barth said, 'At the upper spring.' I called out, and the stranger shot an arrow at me. Then Barth shot, and I returned his fire."

Purdy glared at Kent under low-drawn eyebrows, then turned to Barth. "What you got to say, Barth?"

The wagon boss shot a dark look at Kent, and for all his wound spoke evenly. "I was out for a walk, and was hailed by an Indian. He was friendly. Said he was separated from his tribe, and would guide this train in return for a horse and provisions. I thought it best to draw him out, and then induce him to go into the camp and let you hear his offer." Barth let the rifle slip to the ground, and clasped his arm more firmly. "Then, up came Kent. The Indian lost his head, and I guess I did, too."

YOAKUM snorted. "Lost yore head! Yuh tried to see to it that Cap'n Johnny lost *his!*"

Purdy stood irresolute. Barth's story sounded plausible—except for that shot at Kent.

Then Kent spoke. "Purdy, you remember the arrow shot into the old fort yesterday? I think we might learn something by looking at the one shot at me tonight. It should be on the ground between here and the camp."

"This must be it." Grace Purdy stepped into the torchlight. She extended a feathered shaft.

Yoakum and Kent bent over it, studying it keenly in the blaze. "A twin to the one shot into the fort," Kent declared.

The old scout turned it slowly in his fingers. "And I'll tell ye who shot it." He pointed to the feather. "See that black stain? Wet yer finger, an' off she comes. It's a hawk feather, stained black. Fancy, fer a very fancy sort o' gent. That's Black Hawk's arrer, fer shore."

"The halfbreed?" Kent asked.

Yoakum nodded. "Half Pawnee, half Mex. Runs with the tribe one season, with the Santa Fe people the next."

"Who're these *Comancheros?*" Purdy asked.

Kent answered. "They're poor Santa Fe traders. They pick up a few trinkets and sell 'em to the Indians for horses or mules. Mostly honest, but there are some cut-throats among 'em."

Purdy shot a dark glance at Barth, and spoke bruskly. "Let's get back to camp." He led the way behind the torch. Barth followed slowly. Farr picked up the head wagoner's rifle to carry it in. No one offered to assist the wounded man.

At the campfire Purdy bluntly asked, "What's the state of yore arm, Barth?"

"Flesh wound," the stocky man replied stiffly.

"Ump," said Purdy. "Wal, how do you feel about this wagon train by now? Somehow, you don't seem to fit in with it."

A low murmur of agreement came from the circle of men and women. Barth turned, and his glance flicked along the line of faces. He gave Kent a long, hard stare of unwavering hostility. Then he turned to the train captain.

"Purdy, like as not you're goin' south. The more fool you. I'll take my wagon up in the Cimarron alone."

An explosive sound came from Deaf Yoakum. "Now thet's a mighty good way of settlin' matters," he said with a ghost of a grin.

Purdy faced his followers. "Then we go south to the Canadian in the morning, Purdy goes up the Cimarron. Any objections?" Nobody spoke. "Then south it is. We'll take over this here mule herd, and follow these three guides into Santa Fe."

A dozen voices roared approval. Across the campfire, Kent's eyes met those of Grace Purdy. And this time the warmth in her gaze quickened his pulse to the tempo of danger dared with a willing heart.

X

DOWN the Arkansas rumbled the wagons of the Purdy train. Kent had proposed, and Yoakum and Purdy had agreed, that the new start should be made from Van Buren, where provisions might be found, and a ready market found for the horses displaced by the New Mexico mules.

And Van Buren loomed ahead in good season. Save for the fordings, made difficult by the swollen creeks and rivers, the southward trip offered no problems.

But at the trading town Kent shook his head after an inspection of the oxen. "We'll have to take them along," he told Yoakum, "but I doubt if they'll finish the trip. They're worn down, and these traders, eager to make the big killing in Santa Fe, will push them hard."

Deaf Yoakum nodded. Howsomever, the mules'll pull us through," he observed sententiously. "I'm pickin' up some wagon timbers fer breakdowns on the way. Last chance to find ary hardwood, as well ye know. And I'm dickerin' fer some buffler hide, fer mule moccasins."

Kent lowered his voice. All about them were eager traders, adding a few bolts of cloth to their present store, but none were listening to the two scouts. Nevertheless, Kent had no wish to air his views of trouble ahead. "Deefy, have you seen any old cannon?"

"Cannon, is it?" Yoakum grasped Kent's arm. "This way, Johnny. Not an old

cannon, though. Brand new. Wait'll ye see it."

It stood in the rear of the blacksmith shop, a long brass tube, mounted on a movable truckle. Kent marveled at it.

"Jest the thing to mount in the rear of a wagon, hey, Johnny?" The old scout chuckled. "She shoots a lead ball a mile, feller says. They tested her here. Owner died afore he ever got a wagon rolling, and she's for sale cheap."

The brass gun's appearance in camp brought marveling traders about. It was assigned to the wagon which a trader named Murton shared with Farr, and bolted securely to the bed of the vehicle. Beside it were stored powder and leaden balls.

There was one other task that the two essayed, only to find that the work was taken from their hands. On a sunny day they spread several strips of buffalo hide on the ground and Yoakum laboriously began the job of cutting out pieces to pattern with his hunting knife. Ma Purdy and Grace came by, and gazed with frank amusement and astonishment.

"What in the world?" asked Ma Purdy.

"Wal, mum," Yoakum explained in some confusion, "we're makin' moccasins fer the mules."

Ma Purdy glared. "Yoakum, are you drunk?"

Kent laughed. "He's cold sober, Ma, and we're making real mule moccasins. You see, on a long hard journey a mule's hoofs wear smooth. Then you'd see him walking as if he were on ice, and having just about that much trouble. The buffalo-hide moccasins will give him a better tread."

"That's amazing." Grace sat down and began to study the pattern. "How long do they last?"

"Depends. On a dry trail, quite a while. But if they get wet, they wear through fast."

"It's a good cause," Grace declared. "Let's help, Mother." She pulled Ma Purdy down and soon the two had acquired a monopoly on cutting utensils and thread. Yoakum and Kent, empty-handed, laughed and rose.

Out of earshot, the scout nudged Kent. "Times, wimmen are right handy."

Kent warmly agreed. "They are, Trail's no real place for them, though. If it comes to that, I'm getting a little tired of it myself."

"Oho!" exclaimed the grizzled Yoakum. "And jest when was it that idee crep' up and bit yuh?" He chortled aloud. Suddenly he sobered. "Johnny boy," he said, with an arm flung across the younger man's shoulders, "you an' me may have to part. But till thet time comes, I'll be sidin' yuh through Injuns and Mexicans an' all. She's a fine girl, Johnny." He sighed. "Yes-sir-ree. A good pardner. . . ."

XI

HILARITY and hoo-raw accompanied the early-morning departure of the Purdy train from Van Buren. Old Man Purdy pulled out into the lead, leaned from his wagon seat, gray hair whipping in the fresh breeze, and sang out: "Catch up! Catch up!"

"All's set! All's set!" came from the other wagons in a ringing chorus as teamsters urged on their oxen or mules.

"Stretch out!" cried Purdy. And with a chorused *"Hep!"* the train swung into line.

"Oh, Susannah! Don't you cry for me!
For I come from Alabama with a banjo
on my knee."

The Purdy train was pointed west. Toward Santa Fe.

Deaf Yoakum and Kent rode in the lead. They guided the little train along the north bank of the Arkansas, keeping the river in view.

And through the train, the unspoken thought that Indian hunting grounds lay just ahead was inspiring the men of the train to a new alertness. Teamsters drove with rifles at hand. Guards kept a keen eye on the grazing stock. And when the first redskin campfire was sighted, all in the train were quietly ready for whatever might befall.

It was a Comanche camp. Men and women stirred in apprehension as the word was passed along.

But Kent and Yoakum strode forward confidently to the group of tribesmen about the fire. "It's Big Eagle," Yoakum said. "Barrin' a new kind of devilment, he'll give us a peaceful welcome."

And so it proved. Tabba-Queena, Big Eagle, advanced with all the dignity that a corpulent figure and a pronounced squint could permit. "How, Yoakum!" he cried.

"How, Tabba-Queena!" Yoakum shook hands gravely, as did Kent. "We come through your country to trade with the Santa Fes."

Big Eagle surveyed the wagon train appraisingly. Then he sighted the women, and grinned. "You bring squaws, too."

"Shore," answered Yoakum easily. "Peace rests on the frontier."

"You have something for trade with Big Eagle?" queried the chief.

"Plenty," assured Yoakum. To Kent, in a low voice, he said, "Let's give Big Eagle a chance to see what that brass smoke-piece can do."

Kent nodded understandingly. And while Yoakum, with a shrewd eye for Comanche appreciation, delved into a trade wagon, he made his way to find Farr. Swiftly he explained the plan.

The backwoodsman jumped with alacrity to lead the mule team off the trail. Setting the wagon so that its rear end faced a long flat stretch clear of cottonwoods, Kent and Farr unhitched the mules and led them away. Carefully they loaded the long brass gun. Then Kent signaled to Yoakum.

The scout beckoned to Big Eagle and the chief, followed by a score of tribesmen, came up to inspect the brass piece with undisguised interest. Yoakum pointed to the gun. "Here is our war medicine, Big Eagle. Strong medicine." He squinted at a slender tree half a mile away. "Try fer th' tree, Johnny," he suggested. "Aim low."

Kent trained the gun. Uncertain of its sights, he depressed the muzzle so that its leaden ball would surely strike below the visible base. Then he sprang up, satisfied.

"Touch 'er off!" cried Yoakum.

Kent fired. The roar of the gun brought a bedlam of screams from the startled mules, but all eyes were for the tree. The ball struck the ground in front of the tree, and the tree, with a lurch, canted to one side, swayed, and slowly fell.

Big Eagle clinked, and turned his squint on Yoakum and Kent in turn. "Good medicine," he ventured finally.

Yoakum winked over the chief's shoulder at Kent.

The parley ended with expressions of amity. In farewell, Big Eagle professed his friendship for Kent and Yoakum and all Americans who might travel his way. "Our hearts are glad," he declaimed, "to see you with us. It makes our eyes laugh to see our white brothers."

As the train resumed the westward march, Yoakum grinned. "That was a good shot, Johnny. No tellin' how many Comanches it shot off our necks."

"It gave Big Eagle an eyeful, all right. Lucky that ball hit a root. That made *my* eyes laugh."

"Yup. Only trouble, they's lots of Injuns ahead that didn't see the shootin'."

THROUGH prairie vales, along the north bank of the Canadan River, the wagon train made its slow but steady progress. Under the careful tutelage of Yoakum, Kent and Pierre Lebrun, the Ohioans grew wise in the ways of the frontier. Each night found the dozen wagons formed in a tight barricade, stock secure, water at hand.

The country now began to stretch out in rolling mesa, the long green grass waving in the breeze. Kent and Yoakum scouted far from the river for game. Twice they brought in antelope to replenish the steadily diminishing store of salted meat.

The month of June found the train far up the Canadian, following its winding passage through higher ground, where the cottonwoods grew more sparsely. Yoakum wore a worried air as he spoke to Kent on a cloudy morning after the start.

"We'd better be runnin' inter buffler soon, Johnny. Food's gittin' low."

"Let's try for sign of a wallow to the north, Deefy. There must be buffalo along here, grazing west as the snows run off."

They set out for a long ride. Scouring the mesa to the north, they found old wallows, circular depressions fifty feet in diameter, where buffalo had rolled. But the sign was old. They rode back to camp soberly.

"It looks as if the Indians, or other hunting parties, have swept this plain," Kent hazarded. "That might account for the absence of herds around here."

"Yup. Or them thievin' hangers-on

from the Mexican settlements might be out shootin'." Yoakum brushed a hand wearily across his forehead. Suddenly he glanced sidelong at Kent. "Feel like makin' a long ride?"

"Sure."

"Let's you and me ride ahead to Santa Fe, or leastwise San Miguel, pick up a couple mules, and pack out enough grub to see the train through."

"Leave Pierre with the train." Kent nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, that should be all right. Purdy has learned how to lead, and with Pierre to show the way, we can do more by bringing in food supplies than we've done as meat suppliers."

And so it was settled. The train was camped in a bend of the Canadian when Yoakum and Kent saddled for the long ride.

"How long will you be gone?" Grace Purdy asked Kent.

"Back in a week, with luck," he assured her. "Six days, maybe."

She gave him her hand. "Take care of yourself, Cap'n Johnny."

"And you—take care of yourself, Grace," Kent answered huskily. He pressed her hand between both his own, then turned and mounted quickly. With a clatter of hoofs on the hard shale the two plainsmen rode upriver.

KENT on his sorrel and Yoakum on a hook-nosed roan made good time. Late in the second day they swerved from the Canadian and turned southwest. Here the trail led through ravines and wound about majestic peaks. Into a valley, and up again on a mountainside. On the third day they sat their horses on the high point that overlooked Santa Fe. Off in the distance appeared what looked like a cluster of brick-kilns.

"Thar she is, Johnny." Yoakum spoke with satisfaction. "Good time. Now's to load up and back-track. Three weeks from now, our traders c'n dicker with the Mexicans down thar in the square."

They rode slowly down the slope, hailing the settlers that appeared in shaded doorways of adobe dwellings, and shouted to the wide-eyed brown children that stopped their play as the riders passed. They drew rein before the trading establishment of one Coquille, a Frenchman who long since had made his peace with the Mexican governors of Santa Fe.

From him they had provisions, mules—and news.

"You come from Missouri, eh, on the Canadian?" Coquille chuckled. "You find no gold there, *hein?*"

"Gold? No." Yoakum snorted. Who's findin' gold?"

"You know Barth?'

"Barth!" Yoakum turned and met Kent's startled look. Then Yoakum shrugged, "Yes, we know Barth. He's here—in Santa Fe?"

"Not now. He was here with the expedition to find the gold. He took with him some of these *Comancheros.*"

Fumbling with a flour sack, Yoakum spoke low to Kent. "Barth and the *Comancheros* again. Wal, he kin have the gold, if so be he'll keep to hisself."

XII

BARTH—and the *Comancheros.* The disquieting thought came again to Kent as he and Yoakum pulled up on the north twist of the Canadian, the rendezvous appointed with the wagon train, and saw, on all the wide sweep of the prairie, no sign of the wagon train or solitary scout.

"Mebbe they broke down farther back." Yoakum voiced the only hope for a wagon train in a desert peopled only by bands of Indians bent on the hunt or the battle.

They rode on, casting about for sign. No tracks of wagon wheels showed. Hoofmarks appeared here and there, showing a party had traveled east. They would have met the wagon train. Kent shook his head at sight of them, and Yoakum wore a grim frown.

Then they found the spot on the bank where ruts ran to the water's edge.

"They made a crossin'!" Yoakum could not hide his amazement. "Pierre knew better than that. Now what. . . . He clamped his jaws tight shut, and began circling the scene of the crossing. Kent matched his action, circling in the opposite direction until a hail from Yoakum halted him.

The old scout stood in a tight tangle of cottonwood, his head bared, his whole attitude so suggestive of loss that Kent

guessed before he saw what the scout had found.

It was the body of Pierre, hidden in the brush. Yoakum had torn open the shirt, and the knife wound showed plain above the heart.

"Pierre," muttered Yoakum dully. Then he straightened. "An' the train's acrost the Canadian. Come on, Johnny."

They splashed through the stream, urging their two led mules along. On the far bank the trail was easy to follow. It led south. Due south.

Yoakum stared in that direction, with half-spoken curses on his lips. "Now why . . ." he muttered.

Kent wet his lips. *"Llanos Estacados."*

"Yup. The Staked Plains. Shore and sartin death. How come they headed *south?* We got to ride, Johnny."

They came upon the remains of the wagon train late that afternoon. Slowly smoldering embers marked a circle on the mesa grass—scraps of twisted metal in the heaped-up ashes, and inside that circle were bodies of Ohioans—arrow-studded, fiendishly mutilated. Trail's end. Here on the flat earth of the mesa they had found the land they had journeyed to.

"Right yere was their circle," said Yoakum, and spat. "And right yere's what's left of 'em."

They dismounted and searched among the bodies. Kent's heart was sick with dread of what he might find; but among all the tortured bodies there was no golden-haired girl.

"Five wagons ain't been fired," spoke Yoakum. "Reckon they was took along. Purdy ain't among these bodies. Four-five people ain't either. Don't see yore gal, son."

Kent felt inexpressible relief. So they had taken some prisoners. The girl lived. He would find Grace Purdy and when he did all the savages west of the Mississippi could not prevent him from rescuing her. His mind began to work surely again.

"That's Apache sign," he spoke. "An' what's this?" He retrieved a shiny bauble from the ground. Silver, shiny ornament torn by a defender from a gaudy uniform.

"Comancheros!" exploded the old plainsman. "I smell Barth, by cracky! He come out of Santa Fe with his greasers, aimin' to jump the wagons. And j'ined up with the Apaches."

"Trail leads south," said Kent. "Mexico."

There was silence for several moments. Dusk deepened on the mesa, and off against the horizon the haze became purple, and then began to darken quickly. Yoakum and the younger man looked at each other, both reluctant to speak without first sounding out the other.

Then Yoakum spoke, "I reckon two likely Injun fighters could cause consid'able blood-lettin', follering along after them varmints."

For a moment nothing was said. Then Kent thrust out his hand. "Deefy, you're a pardner I'm proud to side. Let's be moving."

YOAKUM held up a warning hand. Small camp-fires flickered in the clearing below them, throwing into outline the top-heavy shapes of the wagons, and showing the blanketed figures of men rolled on the ground.

"They made camp here fer tonight," said Yoakum. "Apaches are scattered out in the brush. Won't sleep near the fire with the white men."

"There's probably a guard watching the mules," said Kent. For a moment the two men listened. Far off, a buffalo wolf lifted a wild, eery wail. Then there was the oddly human sound of a mule braying in the night. "The herd's over farther to our left," Kent spoke.

Acting on common impulse, they began to crawl toward the left. They came suddenly on two braves sitting nodding near the mules. They had no fire, but each had a blanket wrapped tightly around his shoulders. A quick pressure and Yoakum was gone.

Kent waited until he saw him coming up behind one of the dozing Indians, then he sprang forward. His hand was over the Indian's mouth even as he struck once, twice with the buffalo-knife. The Apache struggled convulsively for a moment, and was still. Kent looked up.

Yoakum was severing a scalp-lock from the Indian's shaven head. "Ain't doin' this fer pleasure, son," he told Kent. "They'll figger it's hostile Injuns if'n we lift a few skelps."

Under the dark blanket of the night the two plainsmen crawled forward. Ahead of them was the dim line of the wagons. Inside the barricade the *Comancheros* slept huddled indistinctly about their fires. Renegade Mexicans, border scum. And in the darkness outside the circle, danger lurked. Apache braves slept lightly, rolled in their blankets on the ground, ready to spring to their feet at any hint of danger. He heard Yoakum whispering, "Reckon we better separate, son. Git as many as we can afore it's light, an' we'll j'ine back where we hobbled the horses."

Their hands met in a quick shake, and the old plainsman crawled away silently.

Kent began to circle the wagon-train, in the opposite direction Yoakum had taken. Every few feet he stopped and listened for any sound. Finally he heard what he wanted, the drunken snoring of an Apache brave.

At that moment came wild cries from the other side of the circle. Indian yells resounded through the night, and from where he lay Kent could see the central camp-fire flame up in the clearing. Suddenly Kent heard Yoakum's voice raised in a hoarse bellow.

"Git away, Johnny. They got—" The bellow broke off sharply. Kent crawled toward the mule-herd. He rose to his feet and dashed off through the night, keeping the herd between himself and the light of the fire. Deefy was caught. His task was to get away as quickly as possible.

He set off at a long, steady running stride for the motte where the animals were tied. Behind, the sound of the aroused camp diminished, finally died out. A first tinge of gray outlined the distant fringes of the mountains. Wearily Kent made his way along the back-track. There was nothing he could do now; he would have to follow the wagon-train, keeping out of sight—and pray for a break. If only they didn't kill Yoakum! The odds were piling up.

XIII

THROUGH that day Kent followed the train. The dry grass of the mesa gave way to the sands of the Staked Plains, and Kent was forced to flog the mules savagely when those wary animals balked at going farther. Steadily the train went south, and Kent followed in its tracks, until the baked ground flung the sun's heat in his face.

Night came. Under cover of mesquite and dried clumps of greasewood, Kent went forward on foot, long rifle cradled in his arms. As he topped a slight rise he saw the encampment of the *Comancheros* spread out below him.

There was an even score of them—swarthy-visaged faces under the coned hats of Mexico. A pulse began beating slowly, throbbingly in Kent's brain. The man, Barth, dressed in the gaudy costume of the *Comancheros,* came into the light of the fire and sat down; then began a conversation with a burly half-breed Kent knew as Black Hawk, last seen in Santa Fe.

An utter lust to kill blinded Kent's sight. All he asked was to hold Barth's throat in his hands and throttle him until he was dead. He found that he was making little growling, inarticulate sounds in his throat. His hands opened and closed convulsively. Then the hard common sense of the frontier cleared his brain, and he began to watch the scene below him with a kind of complete detachment.

Then, while he watched, a council fire of dried wood was dragged up. A line of warriors, shining, painted, naked to the waist, leaped and brandished their weapons against imaginary enemies in the circle of light made by the council fire.

Then some new commotion began beyond the fire's cricle. The tethered mules screamed, and half a dozen painted savages came dragging a struggling figure into the light. It was Deefy Yoakum!

Kent half raised the long rifle. The nearly four foot barrel would throw a small bullet with deadly accuracy at that distance. But he dropped the sights. One, two he could get; then they would be on him.

He slithered down the rise toward the camp, taking advantage of the shadows and the undergrowth with the facility of a trained frontiersman. He had no plan. He didn't know himself what he would do, he was driven by the gnawing need for action. The five wagons were lined up beyond the circle of the fire, on the higher ground to the right of the village. Kent slid forward, ever on the alert for

a skulking savage. He could hear a fierce harangue at the council fire. The Indian chief was addressing Yoakum, telling him of the terrible torture he was to undergo on the stake. Kent bellied close to the end wagon. It was the one which had the cannon bolted on the bed. Into Kent's mind leaped a desperate plan, fraught with danger—but it was a chance. He lay still for a moment, trying to plan the next move.

It was decided for him. Into the murky gloom of the wagons stepped the figure of Barth. Kent watched him climb into the fourth wagon, heard a girl's voice cry out in fear. Kent slid into the shadow of the wagons instantly and stationed himself beside the tail-board.

BARTH stepped down. In his arms was Grace Purdy. She struggled helplessly, the sound of her cries drowned by the din around the council fire.

"Let me down!" she cried once. Barth laughed hoarsely.

"Happen ye ought tuh be glad you're alive, wench—with a white man ready an' willin' to protect ye."

Kent stepped soundlessly behind him. The point of his knife was touching Barth's neck, his hand over his mouth, as he said:

"Move and you're dead, Barth." The renegade stood motionless. Then—"Let Grace Purdy go free, Barth."

Barth dropped the girl, turned quick as a flash and grappled with Kent. Kent's right hand dropped the knife, gripped Barth around the throat. His left hand clutched Barth's right wrist, and barely in time. The renegade, knife-wise, had jerked a blade from his belt-band and now bent all his strength in an effort to drive it into Kent's body.

Over and over in the darkness by the wagons they rolled. Kent's thumbs were sunk deep in Barth's throat, preventing any cry. Barth's left fist beat futilely against Kent's face, his right gripping the knife tried to stab Kent. Barth was a strong man, frontier-reared, but Kent was a steel whip, lithe as a cat. Slowly, Barth's struggles weakened, the knife-hand fell lax. The darkness hid the blackened face, the protruding tongue. Kent's hand gripping his throat never changed its death-grip. A minute passed, two minutes . . . the hideous din around the council-fire was a maniacal sound that rose and fell, but never stopped.

AT length he rose to his feet. Grace Purdy watched him, leaning for support against a wheel of the wagon.

"The keys—get the keys," she whispered faintly. "Barth has them around his neck. They are all chained in the wagon ahead—my father—"

She fell to the earth with a sigh.

Kent called softly into the third wagon. "Purdy. Farr. Anyone else. Are you in there?"

"Who's there?" came the voice of Purdy.

"John Kent. I'm going to turn you loose."

"Thank God!" said Purdy. "They've kept us chained here two days and nights!"

The end wagon contained guns, powder, lead. Kent and the five men loaded the cannon. Double charge of black powder, wadding; and Kent rammed it full of chains and small shot. He lit a match-rope with his flint.

"Wait until I fire the signal," he said. "Then you men swing the cannon down hill and let 'em have it."

Then Kent was gone.

The war-cry of the Apache had grown to a terrible, maniacal thing. In the pit by the council fire the flames leaped high as fresh fuel was brought. Lashed spread-eagled to a cross, Yoakum was carried near the flames. The Apache chief taunted him. Yoakum raised his voice in a bellow that rose above the yells of the dancing savages.

"Damn ye!" he bellowed. "Damn ye all for a passel o' thievin', murderin', pack-rats. I'll see the lot of ye in hell afore I'll whimper, ye damn coyotes!"

The Apache chief spat in his face. Then the cross was placed in the pit and hauled erect by two savages at the sides.

Yoakum coughed. Tendrils of flame, reaching upward, caught fire to his beard. His eyes rolled wildly in his head, but he made no sound. His wiry old body stretched rigid with agony. Then his head drooped forward until it touched his chest. The yells of the Indians redoubled.

Suddenly there came a shot. The Apache chief fell, a small hole in his forehead. Silence fell with terrible suddenness on the

camp. A rifle cracked again, a flat deadly sound, and another savage went down.

A scream of rage went up from the Apaches. Standing in the farthest circle of light was the tall, buckskin-clad figure of a plainsman. Standing coolly with rifle at shoulder, he fired again. Another Indian dropped.

In a body, savage warriors sped across the clearing, brandishing weapons and yelling hideously. The plainsman turned and vanished into the darkness outside the circle of light.

Then, with a roar that split the night, an awful blast came from the wagons above the camp. The cannon spoke and simultaneously, as though a great hand had bowled them over, the pursuing warriors went down.

The carnage was horrible. Chains, whipping terribly through the air, tore a wide swath of death solidly through the warrior band. Small shot spread and wrought awful havoc in the closely pressed body of Apaches.

A solid volley of rifle-fire came on the heels of the cannon-blast, smashing the few Indians who staggered in the welter of threshing limbs and dismembered bodies. By that time spare rifles had been leveled up and spat! The bewildered *Comancheros* about their fire received the full force of a fusillade delivered at close range. Black Hawk clutched at the gaudy baubles on his chest, rocked as he sat cross-legged, toppled over to the ground. Four others went down. The rest fled the sudden attack; they dashed into the outer darkness beyond the camp.

Kent was running toward the pit where Yoakum still hung, head drooped limply on his chest.

Kent laid hold of the cross and dragged it from the fire. He laid it on the earth of the clearing and rapidly cut the bonds that secured the old plainsman. He began to raise and lower Yoakum's arms. Purdy came down from the wagons, followed by the others. Grace Purdy walked with her arms about Ma Purdy, a slender girl with a proud tilt to her golden head.

Yoakum gasped and opened his eyes. He squinted one eye at Kent.

"Knowed ye'd come, son. . . ."

Kent turned to the girl who stood close to him, golden hair alive in the play of light from the dying council fire.

"Grace Purdy, man here needs nursin' a-plenty before we reach Santa Fe." The girl stepped to his side, and quite naturally his arm went around her.

"Land sakes! Man half burned to death and you stand a-gawking at him!" Ma Purdy cried. She went to Yoakum's side, began tearing lengths of cloth from a petticoat. The sound of Purdy's voice ringing quick commands to the remaining teamsters broke across the clearing. "Git ready, git ready, ef'n they should come skulkin' back. . . ." But Kent and the girl were lost to everything except what they found in each other's eyes.

DAYS passed. What remained of the wagon train had turned north toward its old trail. Then one morning the lead outfit pulled up and old Purdy came running up the line. "Hi, look. Come and look!"

They had reached the gates of promised land at last. Below them lay Santa Fe, a strange, magnificent, wilderness city, a transplanted town of old Spain, splendid with churches and watch-towers outlined against the hot blue Southwestern sun. Kent stood, one arm flung across his saddle, and smiling up at Grace Purdy.

"Quite a sight, eh?"

"It's marvelous!" Slowly she turned from her study of that new scene, and laid a hand on his arm. "It's such a big country, this West."

"And getting bigger," Kent replied. Rifles were banging and men were whooping. "Today we're celebrating the birth of the United States. The Fourth of July. But we can celebrate more than that—the growth of the country we call home. We're stretching out. I might even show the Stars and Stripes over the Palace yonder."

"Our country just can't stop growing, can it, Cap'n Johnny?"

"Only one thing might stop it," Kent replied seriously.

"What?"

"Well, now," he said with a grin, "if girls were to say 'No' when men asked them to marry. . . ."

She laughed, and buried her face on his buckskin-fringed shoulder.

Trail for a Texan!

By CLIVE CROSBY

"Twenty dollars Mex—or starve!" Barrier guns held Risky River, backed up by lobo law. But that squirrel-gun toting Texican aimed to cross—and paid his toll in long-rifle coin.

THEY were gaunt men, who cast long shadows as they moved about the big fire. The light of the high flames, playing on their rugged faces, made them seem as badly weathered as their ragged garments. Camp Haywire was holding its usual nightly indignation meeting; but tonight the movers appeared to have hardly enough energy to get really excited. Their voices barely rose above the roar of the river.

"It's a dirty steal," said the man from Missouri. "That crook Kane'd just as lief see us stay here an' starve."

He had said the same thing a hundred times in the last ten days.

"I figure the town is backing him up," suggested somebody. "Long as we camp here we spend money in their dirty stores."

"Sure now, that's a idea," said a man

with an old country brogue. "How did you figger that out? I betcha there be all of fifty, m'ybe fifty-five, dollars amongst the crowd of us."

Nobody laughed.

They talked on, expressing the same old thoughts, using the same old words. Several men joined them, coming from the ring of dilapidated prairie wagons which circled the fire, like shipwrecks around a reef. It was these ancients which had given the camp its name. They were all held together by haywire.

An exceedingly tall man moved toward the fire. He walked with the peculiar, jerking gait of a horseman. In one big fist he grasped a Winchester saddle rifle by the lock. The short-barreled weapon looked like a stick in his hand. From his other hand dangled a pair of long-eared jackrabbits. He stood on the edge of the crowd unnoticed, and with a pair of deep-sunk eyes solemnly looked down a long, crooked nose at the movers.

The talk about the fire went on.

"Six wagons went over today," somebody volunteered. "The lucky devils."

A rumbling grumble cut by a few lurid curses passed over the group.

"All the land'll be took up twice over, time we get there," whined an old-timer with a long beard.

"Yeah, *if* we get there," somebody answered. "Anyway, it's going to be a hard winter. Unplowed Indian land don't grow dollars in the winter time."

A man on the edge of the crowd noticed the big fellow who had come late.

"Hello, Martin. Have any luck?" he asked.

"Not much, Sam," the big fellow answered in a startlingly deep, rugged voice. "Got a few jacks. Some of 'em was fit to eat. I left a couple with yore ol' woman an' give two to ol' lady Conway. Got two more I'm savin' for the wife and kids." He held up his left hand from which dangled the two half-grown jackrabbits.

"Gosh, Martin," said the other with real feeling, "the Lord knows what we'd eat if it weren't for you."

Several men turned and nodded greetings to the newcomer. Al Martin, the tall man, was well liked. His remarkable skill with the short-barreled rifle was appreciated and respected. Yet—well, no matter what he might turn his hand to, Martin wasn't a farmer in the sense the others were. And that made a great difference.

"Well, jawin' about it ain't goin' to git us across the river," said the man with the Missouri twang.

This comment seemed to silence them for a moment.

"Let's take the ferry by force," somebody mumbled from the depths of the crowd.

The crowd moved a little uneasily. Martin looked them over gravely, frowning a little, and then ambled away to his own wagon.

NAN, Martin's wife, was sitting on the wagon tongue holding the younger of their two children. Al hung the two rabbits up on the wagon box out of reach of stray dogs and sat down beside her.

"Don't like the way that crowd's actin'," he volunteered. "They ain't makin' as much noise as usual, but they're a heap more desprit."

"Well, maybe they'll do somethin'," Nan suggested hopefully.

Al shook his head. "Ain't much they *can* do," he said. They ain't fightin' men. Ain't even got the fight o' most farmers. If they had, they wouldn't be movers. They're here 'cause they didn't have the fight to stick some other place. Now, 'cause the gov'ment opens up a little Indian land, they're figgerin' on gettin' somethin' for nothin'."

"Well, you're one of them," she replied.

"Aw, girl, we been all over that," he argued. "What's the use o' bringin' it up again? You know it was the only bet we could see between us an' goin' back to buckskin."

"Oh, I know." Nan sobbed a little.

They sat in silence for a while.

"Did you learn anything uptown this afternoon?" she questioned at length.

"Not much," he answered, pushing his battered hat off his forehead and looking down the black and white expanse of the river to where he could see the lights of the little town of Kane's Crossing. "Met a' old-timer by the name of Dad Caldwell. He's the justice of the peace. Got funny little white billygoat whiskers, but he's a white man. Said the hull town was with

us, but it's a 'law an' order' place and Kane's got the law."

Many of the movers had left the fire. Only a few of the more active ones remained.

"You didn't see no chance to get a job of work?" asked Nan.

"Shucks, girl," he rumbled, "they's fifty o' us here, all a-lookin' for that."

"How you figure we're goin' to get along, even if we do get across the ferry?" she wanted to know. "The good land'll be taken up, an' even if it ain't, we got to live this winter."

Al reached his great hand out awkwardly to pat her on the back.

"Don't get all worked up about it, girl," he said. "I still got the gun and a heap of cartridges. I reckon we can get along."

But Nan was not to be comforted so easily and Al could think of nothing to say.

"Hey, Martin," shouted one of the men still at the fire. "We're going down to the ferry. Come along."

"Ain't no use in that," Al rumbled. "You can't do nothin'."

"Come on, anyway," the fellow shouted.

Al shrugged and got up.

"Dont get in trouble, Al," Nan said.

"I won't," he answered. "I'm goin' to keep them out of trouble. They're most all married men."

"So are you," she called after him as he joined the group going down the road toward town.

THE ferry, a flat scow that was held in place by an overhead cable and operated by sweeps, lay tied to the near bank of the river at the foot of the main road of the little town. Close at hand a light shone from the window of the shanty where lived "Fat" Johnson, the big, loud-mouthed, would-be gunman who worked the ferry.

"Hey, Fat," one of the movers called. "Come out here and jaw a minute."

Johnson kicked open the door and stood there scowling, a rifle in his hand as though ready to repel an attack.

"What do you want?" he demanded when he recognized the movers.

"Sure, we want to get across the damn' river," answered the man from Missouri.

"Oh, yeah," said Johnson, relaxing and resting the butt of the gun on the doorsill. "Well, that's my business. I'll take you over and glad to. As I tol' you all before, I've just one rate, twenty dollars a trip and one wagon is a load."

"That's what we come to talk about," went on the man from Missouri.

"Well, talkin' won't cost you nothin'," Johnson grinned. "Go right ahead."

The movers shifted around restlessly. None of them appeared to like to be in front. Al Martin soon found himself at the very head of the group. Beside him on one side stood the man from Missouri. He seemed to be the spokesman for the crowd. On the other side was a young Yankee who was moving alone. He was new to the West, but had ambitions to be a frontiersman.

"Let's make a deal," suggested the Missourian. "You let the folks over what's got children. The rest of us'ns 'll stay here and try to go their ferry."

"Nothin' doin'," Fat answered. "Got to have twenty dollars in advance."

"You can't get blood out of a turnip," somebody mumbled.

"Hell, feller, if we stay here we'll all starve," argued the Yankee.

"That'd sure be plumb grievous," said Fat. "But me, I'm runnin' a ferry, not a poor farm."

Some of the movers grumbled. Several of the men were told to "shut up" by their companions.

"How about making a deal with you personally, Fat?" suggested the Missourian in a hushed voice. "Come early in the mornin' when Kane ain't aroun'. He never gets up before noon. We'll give you all the cash in the outfit if you'll let us over. We'll work the whole show ourselves. You don't need tell him and we sure ain't a-goin' to."

Johnson was grinning. He looked back into the shanty and nodded his head. A man in his early thirties stepped through the door. He was dressed in the long black coat, embroidered pearl-buttoned vest and flat-brimmed black hat of the professional gambler. Under the hat was a colorless and expressionless face.

The movers recognized young Kane, the owner of the ferry, a gambler with a bad reputation. When he spoke his voice was

a rasping monotone, as emotionless as his face.

"There ain't no use you fellows coming aroun' here like this," he said. "I ain't none at all curious about yore pers'nal troubles. I'm runnin' a ferry to make money, not for charity. Now get away from here and don't be botherin' Fat. He don't give a damn and I don't give a damn whether you starve or not."

"You don't, hey!" somebody yelled from the back of the group of movers. "Well, how would you like us to take the ferry and run it ourselves?"

A rumbling voice damned Kane and all his ancestors.

"Kill the low-down thief," shouted somebody.

KANE stepped back and threw open his coat for easy access to the two holstered guns that hung from his belt. Johnson swung up the rifle so that it covered the crowd.

"Trying to take our ferry by force, are you?" Fat roared. "Clear out of here before I blow some of you to hell." He drew the hammer back with an ominous click.

A forty-five boomed with nerve-shattering suddenness. Martin's head snapped around and he looked down at the Yankee beside him. The boy stood trembling and white of face, his hand holding a smoking Colt.

For what seemed a long moment nobody else moved. Then Fat Johnson's rifle clattered to the ground and the big guard followed it in a heap.

"Let's go from here," a mover hissed in a hoarse voice.

Some of the more timid movers in the back actually turned and fled toward Camp Haywire. Those in front fell back a foot or two. Kane had jerked out both his guns and was covering them, but he was too old a campaigner to start shooting. He knew that if he ever opened fire on that crowd, though he might get a few of them, they would most assuredly get him in the end.

"I'll get you for that," he said. "I'll get you, every last one of you!"

"Oh, yeah," rumbled Al, speaking for the first time. "Well, I reckon when you want us you'll know where to find us."

With that Martin and the Missourian turned on their heels and led the movers back toward camp.

"Bad business, that," Al said to the Missourian as they walked along. "This is a law-and-order town. The kid'll have to stand trial."

"Yeah," said the Missourian. "Reckon the young fool wanted to make a rep for himself."

"Hey, you fellows," somebody up ahead shouted. "If we hurry maybe we can get across the ferry 'fore they put on a new guard."

"Yeah, that's an idea," mumbled Martin. "Mebbe yes, and mebbe no." But he and the Missourian hurried after the others toward Camp Haywire.

The camp was in wild confusion when they reached there. Somebody had kicked the big central fire out into a wide circle and lit two or three others until the whole camp site was almost as light as day. Men were catching up horses and harnessing them, shouting and cursing. Dogs barked. Every kid in camp seemed to be bawling. There was a clatter of pots and pans being loaded. And when the first wagon rolled out of camp toward the ferry everybody cheered.

Martin told Nan to get packed up, ready to go, while he ran across the camp and beyond toward the prairie where he had picketed his team. It was dark away from the brilliant light of the fires. Al tripped over a picket rope and sprawled full-length. He heard six-guns popping in the direction of the town. He stopped and listened. Several wagons had already gone down toward the ferry, but he could see nothing and tell nothing from the sound of the shots. He went on and began untying his horses. He had one horse when he heard some shouts from camp and looked around.

The scene in the camp was as plain to him as a lighted stage. A lad in his 'teens, the son of one of the movers, ran into the light of the big fire, yelling at the top of his voice. His words carried out to Martin.

"They're fixing to lynch that Yankee," the boy screamed. "A bunch of gunmen and them bouncers from Kane's saloon. They're getting their horses and coming out here."

MEN began running here and there about the camp, shouting. Some were looking for the guns they were afraid to show. A couple of women screamed. Al Martin retied his picket rope and headed back, his long legs taking him over the ground in gigantic leaps.

Just as Martin reached the circle of wagons, a crowd of mounted men charged up to the fire and pulled their horses to plunging stops. They were shouting and waving guns in the air. Two of them waved ropes, the ends of which were tied into hangmen's nooses.

"Bring out that killer," roared a big red-bearded rider in the lead, waving a six-gun.

"Bring him out." The cry was taken up by a half dozen voices.

"Lynch the devil," somebody shouted in a whisky-cracked voice. Most of the crowd of saloon toughs were drunk.

Al Martin dodged between a couple of wagons and almost ran over a little old man carrying a great long-barreled, eight-gauge shotgun.

"Gimme that," Al snapped, grabbing the gun before the words were out of his mouth.

"Take it," the old fellow shouted, glad to be relieved of the responsibility. But Al had gone on.

The riders were getting impatient. Young Kane himself was not with them, but the leaders were his hirelings.

"Come on, you guys. Give up that killer or we'll open fire on the crowd of you," roared the big red-head in the lead, a bouncer in Kane's saloon.

Others took up the shout.

"Let's run them all out and burn the camp."

"Don't waste lead. Shoot to kill."

"To hell with these movers. They're nothing but bums anyway."

There was a movement among the movers who were grouped irresolutely beyond the fire. Al Martin, the big shotgun held at ready, stepped out and faced the mob. Immediately those horsemen in the front quieted down. Gradually those behind sensed that something was going on and fell silent.

"Reckon you fellers is kinda goin' off half-cocked," Martin drawled. "You better go on back where you come from and forgit about this business. When the marshal comes out here, we'll let him take what he wants, but you fellers ain't goin' to get nothin' but trouble."

For a moment nobody answered, then the red-head exploded.

"Out of the way," he roared. "We come to get that killer and we're goin' to get him." He moved his horse threateningly closer, his six-gun was in his hand, but the muzzle was pointing high. The men behind him moved restlessly. That shotgun Al carried looked to them like a pretty vicious sort of weapon.

"Reckon you've spurred that horse up just close enough," Al warned the red-head. "You touch him again and he moves any closer, I reckon I'll just naturally have to use this cannon. The buckshot in this thing ought to account for about a half dozen of you-all."

The red-headed man swore, but he hesitated. Somebody back in the crowd snickered.

"What's the matter, Red? You ain't a-skeered, are you?" asked a laughing, drunken voice.

"No, I ain't," Red bellowed. Bringing down his six-gun, he leaped his horse directly toward Al.

The shotgun thundered. Horses snorted and plunged. Al's long body snapped back against the recoil. And the red-headed man went backwards out of the saddle over his horse's rump, his body falling almost into the fire. It lay perfectly still.

Wild confusion seized the riders that were in the front of the mob. Horses plunged and reared while the riders cursed each other. They tried to swing around, to get away from that threatening shotgun, but they were too closely packed.

A new voice rose above the noise of all others:

"What's going on here? Put away them guns. This is the Law."

A BIG man in a black Stetson, carrying two long-barreled Colts, came running up on foot. After him came old Dad Caldwell, his pointed white mustache and goatee bristling fight. He, too, was carrying a couple of six-shooters.

"You fellows can't pull this stuff aroun' here and get away with it," the marshal roared. "Get away from here. Beat it."

His two Colts, backed by Caldwell's two, and the one load still left in Martin's shotgun, were more than enough persuasion. The riders backed away. But they moved sullenly and slowly, muttering curses and threats of vengeance.

"We'll go, but we ain't through," one of them growled. "You'll hear some more from us an' so'll that long guy what got Red."

"Beat it, I said. Git." And the marshal took a threatening step forward.

When the horsemen had finally moved away toward town the marshal turned to the movers.

"All right, feller," he said to Martin. "The war's over. Call off your heavy artillery."

Al grinned. "Reckon you fellers come just in time," he said. "The other hammer on this gas pipe is rusted down so I ain't been able to cock it."

Dad Caldwell blew through his mustache. "How many birds did you get with the other one?" he asked.

"The old gun don't seem to scatter very good any more," Al answered, a twinkle in his eye. "I reckon I got only one."

"And he's dead," the marshal spoke up after examining Red's body. "Took the whole load in his chest. Now, about Fat's killing. I got to arrest the man that did it. We'll see that he gets a fair trial."

Martin didn't reply. His face had turned stony and emotionless.

"Yeah, boys," Dad addressed the other movers. "We'll give the fellow a fair trial. Ye better give him up without any trouble. An' you, Martin, hang aroun'. We'll need you as a witness. The Court'll pay you one dollar a day and you can forget about killin' Red. He was one skunk as needed it."

"Seein' as you put it that way," Al answered, "I'll stick aroun'. And I sure admire to tell the jury that Fat had a gun on us when he got plugged."

The young Yankee who had done the shooting stepped out.

"All right, Marshal," he said. "Reckon I'll be going along with you." He held out his two hands for the steel cuffs.

"No need of that," smiled the marshal. "Ain't armed, are you? Then come along." They left camp together, walking toward the town.

DAD CALDWELL stayed behind, talking to Martin. Dad had been watching the big fellow shrewdly.

"Say, Martin," he said. "You ain't a regular mover. How come you're with this bunch?"

"Well, I'm movin', ain't I?" Al naswered with a wry grin. "I'm here fer the same reason they are. I ain't got the price of that damn' ferry. Course I usta be a puncher an' this is my first land rush, but—"

"Then you ain't no regular mover," interrupted the old man. "You gotta be at least six diff'runt rushes 'fore you can be a honest-to-God mover. Why don't you stick aroun' here?"

"Well," Al explained, "I figger I might as well starve on my own land over in the reservation as stay here an' starve on some other feller's. But if you got a job, lead me to it."

The old man shook his head. He had noticed that most of the movers were hooking up their horses and loading up their wagons. "Where they figure they're goin'?" he asked.

Al explained that they were going down to the ferry, hoping that it would be unguarded in the excitement and they could put themselves across.

"Hope they do," said Dad. "It's a damn' shame the way young Kane is running that thing. I tried to do something about it but couldn't. Kane's old man was the first settler in these parts. He was an honest old fellow and the Territory give him an exclusive charter to run this ferry. He was the kind of fellow would haul you over for nothin' if you didn't have the price. And those that had it he only charged enough to pay expenses.

"But he up an' died this spring. His son heired the old man's ranch and ferry and everything else. But that boy is cut from a different tree than his old man. He's always been kind o' wild. He'd had this saloon uptown that was so low we'd a run it out, but we wouldn't do that on account of his old man. When we heard he was goin' to charge twenty dollars on the ferry, the town folks got together and tried to buy it from him. I kinda figure the town ought to own it anyway. But Kane wouldn't sell. Told us all to go to hell.

With the money that he got from the old man he can keep a bunch o' gun-slingers that would make you think twice 'fore you talk hard to him. We wrote the Gov'nor about it but if he does anything, it will take a long time. You know how them things are."

Al grunted.

A gun went off up in the direction of town. It was followed rapidly by four or five others. Then came an ominous silence.

Dad looked at Martin. As with one thought they both started running in the direction of the shooting and town.

Al's long legs soon outdistanced the older man. And he did not slow up until he had swung into the main road of town. There in the dust lay the bodies of the marshal and the young Yankee surrounded by a widening pool of dampness.

"Dead," Martin gasped as he dropped on his knees beside the still forms. "Bushwhacked. Shot down without a chance to draw their guns."

Both bodies were riddled with bullets.

"The dirty killers," Dad panted as he came up. "Kane's gone too far this time. Are they dead?"

"Dead," said Al, getting to his feet.

He noticed that the road was deserted and yet everybody in town must have heard the shooting. He shook his head. When a gang gets so strong that nobody in town wants to be called as a witness against them, then things are going pretty far.

AL'S thoughts were interrupted by Caldwell.

"We'll show that young squirt Kane," he sputtered. "I'll call a meetin' tonight. We'll run the killers out—or plant 'em permanent. Come on, Martin, we'll meet in Mac's store."

Martin looked thoughtfully down his nose at the old judge. He shook his head.

"I'd kinda like to help you out," he drawled. "But—well, this killin' kinda lets me out of bein' a witness. There won't be no trial now. An', Dad, me, I'm a family man. Reckon you people are goin' to have to clean yore own dirty shirts. Me, I'm goin' to see if I can get across that ferry."

Dad glared up at him, his face red.

The old man snorted and contemptuously turning on his heel, headed uptown without another word.

A little half-smile on his face, Al stood there looking after him. There was something almost wistful in the big fellow's attitude. Then he shook his head and headed back toward Camp Haywire.

When Martin got back to camp, he found that Nan had brought up the horses. Together they harnessed up and finished loading. By the time they were ready to be on their way, half of the movers had gone. Nan crawled in back on top of their furniture with the two kids and Al, getting up on the box, swung the team around on the river road.

As he did so, a glow appeared in the sky down toward the ferry. It spread and increased. Al watched it with growing curiosity.

A few hundred feet farther along the road they met an old mover dejectedly driving his team back toward Camp Haywire. The old fellow was muttering and swearing to himself. He pulled up beside Al. Al checked his team.

"Ain't no use going down there," the old fellow said. "Four o' Kane's gunmen showed up. They won't let nobody cross."

"What's all the blaze?" Al asked.

"Big brush fires, so's you can't sneak up on them."

Other wagons were coming back from the ferry. They had to pull up behind the old man and were shouting for him to move on.

"Reckon I'll go down and just take a look-see," Al said and he clucked to his team.

"Suit yourself," said the old man, "but there ain't no use in that."

The two wagons moved apart.

Others were turning around and going back toward the camp, but Al drove on. Once he faced around and looked under his wagon sheet. Nan was sitting on one side holding the younger kid. The other one was asleep in a crib they had rigged up. Al said nothing but his eyes lingered a moment on his Winchester hanging just over Nan's head.

He drove on. He had passed the last of the returning movers and approached the light around the ferry house. The whole scene was lit up. Al could see the four gunmen. They were mounted, slouch-

ing in their saddles in front of the ferry house.

THE rumble of Al's wagon attracted the horsemen's attention and they recognized the driver immediately.

"There's the skunk that got Red," one of them shouted. "Let's blow the farmer to hell."

The four of them spurred their horses viciously and charged down on Al and his outfit, shooting as they came. At first it was too great a range for a six-gun; and no man can shoot accurately from the back of a plunging horse. Then Al saw one bullet kick up dust not ten feet from his off horse and the next moment a shot ripped through the wagon sheet, struck the butt of his Winchester and ricocheted out through the back of the wagon, not six inches above Nan's head.

Al let out a roar that started way down within the depths of his being. His long arm shot out and snatched down the rifle, which had not been seriously damaged. And with one step he leaped off the box and plunged away from the wagon. Martin ran at an angle to draw the fire of the gunmen away from his wife and kids.

A bullet kicked up dirt just in front of him as the horsemen turned in the new direction. Several balls cut by dangerously close as the charging mounts shortened the distance to their quarry.

Al reached the road that was the main street of town. Suddenly he dropped to one knee, facing the four charging gunmen. The rifle butt hit his shoulder the moment his knee touched the ground. Instantly he fired. One of the riders slumped forward in his saddle and pitched head first down between his mount's front legs. With one lightning move Al levered out the empty shell and fired again. A gunman went sideways out of his saddle, stiff like a pinwheel.

Bullets were biting close to Al now. The remaining two riders were almost on top of him. As he fired the third time a bullet seared across his cheek. Blood spattered into his eyes and he flinched as he pulled the trigger.

A horse went down with a shrill scream. The horseman remaining was almost on top of Al. Martin fired as he dodged the animal's hoofs. Through the billowing smoke, he saw the rider's distorted face. As the horse jumped Martin's crouching form, the gunman's lifeless body fell at Al's feet.

Martin stood up and looked around. A gun roared and a bullet tore through his shirt, burning a gash on his left arm and over his left ribs. Instinctively Al ducked and as he did so he saw that the man whose horse he had killed was unhurt. The fellow was behind the body of the animal and was blazing away at Al, who had no cover at all.

Martin let out a yell and charged in great leaps straight at his enemy, shooting as he went. It was too much for the gunman. Excitedly he stood up to return the fire of this crazy giant who could handle a Winchester with such deadly precision. Martin fired the last shot in his rifle. The bullet went through the other man's chest. A silence, broken only by the roar of the river, settled over the scene.

Al stopped and looked around, jamming shells into the magazine of his rifle. Near him in various poses were the bodies of four men and a horse.

"Shoot at women, would you, you skunks," he suddenly roared at the dead men. "Well, you won't do it no more. Where's that boss of yours?"

Getting no answer. Al swung around and faced the town. The saloons and other buildings along the road were bursting open with the curious. In silent awe they stared down at the scene of the battle. But Martin did not see them.

ALL Al Martin saw was a saloon up at the far end of the street—Kane's saloon. He headed for it, his long strides taking him right up the center of the road. His rifle dangled muzzle down like a club, in his big fist.

As Martin stalked past Mac's general store, Dad Caldwell came out from the crowd to meet him.

"Come on in, Martin," Dad said. "We're having a meeting. Going to run Kane out."

"To hell with that," Al growled without even looking around. And on up the street he marched, Dad tagging.

They reached Kane's saloon. Al kicked open the door and strode through the crowd. His manner made men step back.

Not a hand was raised to stop him. Direct to Kane's private office he went and threw open the door.

Kane jumped up from behind his desk, where he had been sitting. He reached for his holster, but the muzzle of Al's rifle, now held unwaveringly in two big hands, swung up and pointed directly at the third pearl button from the top on the saloon-keeper's fancy vest. Kane raised his hands. Al moved into the room. Dad Caldwell, following him, closed the door.

They stood thus, staring at each other, for a long, immovable moment. Then Al's anger seemed to go out of him.

"Hello, Kane," he drawled in the mildest imaginable voice. "I just come up to see if you really have a charter to run that ferry."

Kane's face, which had been white, turned red with anger. He put down his hands. He began to bluster and swear. Then something in Al's quiet, mild manner checked him.

"The charter is out to the ranch," Kane growled. "I don't keep it here."

"No?" said Al. "That's queer. This is yore office, Kane. I kinda reckon you got that charter right here in your desk."

Again Kane began to bluster. Then he hesitated and reaching down into a drawer of his desk produced a legal document.

"All right," Al went on. "Now, Kane, you sit down at that desk and write out a bill of sale right on the back of that thing."

Kane swore. "It won't be legal," he objected. "I protest. I'm doing it under duress."

"Yeah," said Martin. "Well, we'll have to take a chance on that. Write it anyway. You shouldn't mind it if it won't be legal."

Kane sat down and picked up a pen.

"Now write as I say," Al directed, moving up so he could look over the man's shoulder. "I, Ace-High Kane, do hereby sell and transfer all my rights and interests in the ferry mentioned by this charter to the town of Kane's Crossing, as represented by Dad Caldwell. Now sign it."

Kane did as he was told.

"Give him a dollar, Dad," said Al. "That might help make it legal."

Al picked up the paper in his left hand to read it. The muzzle of his rifle, which he still held in his right fist, pointed down at the floor.

"*Look out!*" yelled Dad.

MARTIN dropped the paper and stepped back as Kane's gun came up over the edge of the desk. But as he moved, Al swung up the rifle, holding it in one hand as a six-shooter is held. His finger was within the trigger guard and he fired the fraction of a second before Kane did. Kane's bullet tore through the top of his desk. The rifle bullet went through Kane's neck. He crashed down behind the desk, lifeless.

The roar of the shot was still vibrating through the little office when the door was broken open by a crowd of citizens.

"Where's Kane?" demanded a man in the lead.

"There he is, what's left of him," Dad answered, pointing toward the body.

"Gosh," snorted the man who had asked, as the others crowded into the room. "All these tin-horns an' gunmen ran when they see we meant business. I was hopin' we'd at least get Kane."

Others crowded around and asked questions. Al Martin pushed his way through the crowd and left the building almost unnoticed. Going down the road he met Nan.

Nan was a little hysterical.

"All this killing and fighting," she sobbed, "and you taking these chances. And what for? For the chance of crossing the river—and starving on the old reservation instead of on this side of the river."

The sound of a cheer reached them from back in the direction of Kane's saloon. Dad Caldwell came out into the road.

"Hey, Martin," he shouted.

Nan and Martin stopped and waited.

"Say," he said. "Al, I remembered that we're needin' a new marshal and I suggested you. The crowd up there went crazy. Will you take the job? I can rent you a nice little house on the edge of town."

Al looked down his nose, first at Dad and then at his wife. Nan's eyes were sparkling through her tears. She nodded her head violently.

"Oh!" she cried. "All this fighting and killing to get across the river and now we ain't going after all."

JESSE JAMES—Dead

SEVERAL months ago Arizona Bill set off a can of giant blasting powder by claiming to have recently seen Jesse James in the flesh. Since then we have received dozens of letters insisting that the famed outlaw has been safe in his grave these many years. On the other hand, a few seem to think that the James brother might possibly still be alive.

No proofs have been received to convince us that the legend that James lived on was anything but a high wind in the treetops. On the other hand, we received no positive proof that it wasn't some other man that those bounty hunters shot in the back. The most conclusive evidence on either side was sent us by Mr. F. N. Titus of Horseheads, N. Y. We are printing the picture which is purported to be the dead Jesse James along with some excerpts of Mr. Titus' letter.

Editor of Frontier:

I enclose a photo of James taken after his death. You will find the same photo I think in a story written by his son. I obtained this from a party residing in Missouri, the James home state. . . .

Respy.,
F. N. Titus.

Editor's Note:

At last Jesse James can go to his rest.

NORTH·WEST ROMANCES . . .

Vanished men, a mysterious girl, and a lost mine—a sweet murder set-up—'til Mountie Chet Tyson mushed to Caribou and matched his lone guns against the toughest hell-camp north of 60°—BLACK FURY, by Fred Nebel, in the Winter issue. Also THE GOLDEN GIRL OF WHISPERING VALLEY, by Jack Bechdolt, and novelets and shorts by A. deHerries Smith, Victor Rousseau and others.

WINGS . . .

"Confirmation requested!"—another Ace notches his tally in blazing skies. In that death fandango of bucking Vickers, and maddened shriek of tortured wires, this greatest of war-air magazines was born. The current issue boasts novelets by such famed fictioneers as George Bruce, Joel Rogers, and Tom O'Neill.

LOVE ROMANCES . . .

An old favorite steps out in new clothes. Two exclusive new features appear in the current issue of Love Romances: HOW TO GET YOUR MAN—AND HOLD HIM—this is the second article on how to acquire that elusive something called charm, by a noted psycho-analyst. Also FAMOUS LOVERS OF HISTORY—brief, fascinating glimpses into the loves of history's glamour girls.

DETECTIVE BOOK MAGAZINE . . .

Black oily tide swirls suckingly around the wharfs of London's Limehouse. Thick, yellow fog rolls silently through the crooked, evil alleys. A bubbling cry of horror, and the soft pad-pad of receding footsteps—MURDER! Follow the dark mystery trail of death in this clever crime magazine. Stories and articles by men who are masters in the art of criminology.

AIR STORIES . . .

One by one those billionaire sky-guys crashed to death in flaming crates. Then Captain Death took a hand, baiting a mile-high cloud trap . . . THE DOOM CLUB, a gripping air-mystery novelet by Joel Rogers. Also THUNDER BIRD, a complete tropic-air novel by Herman Petersen. Stories and articles by George Bruce, Andrew A. Caffrey, Franklin P. Miller and others.

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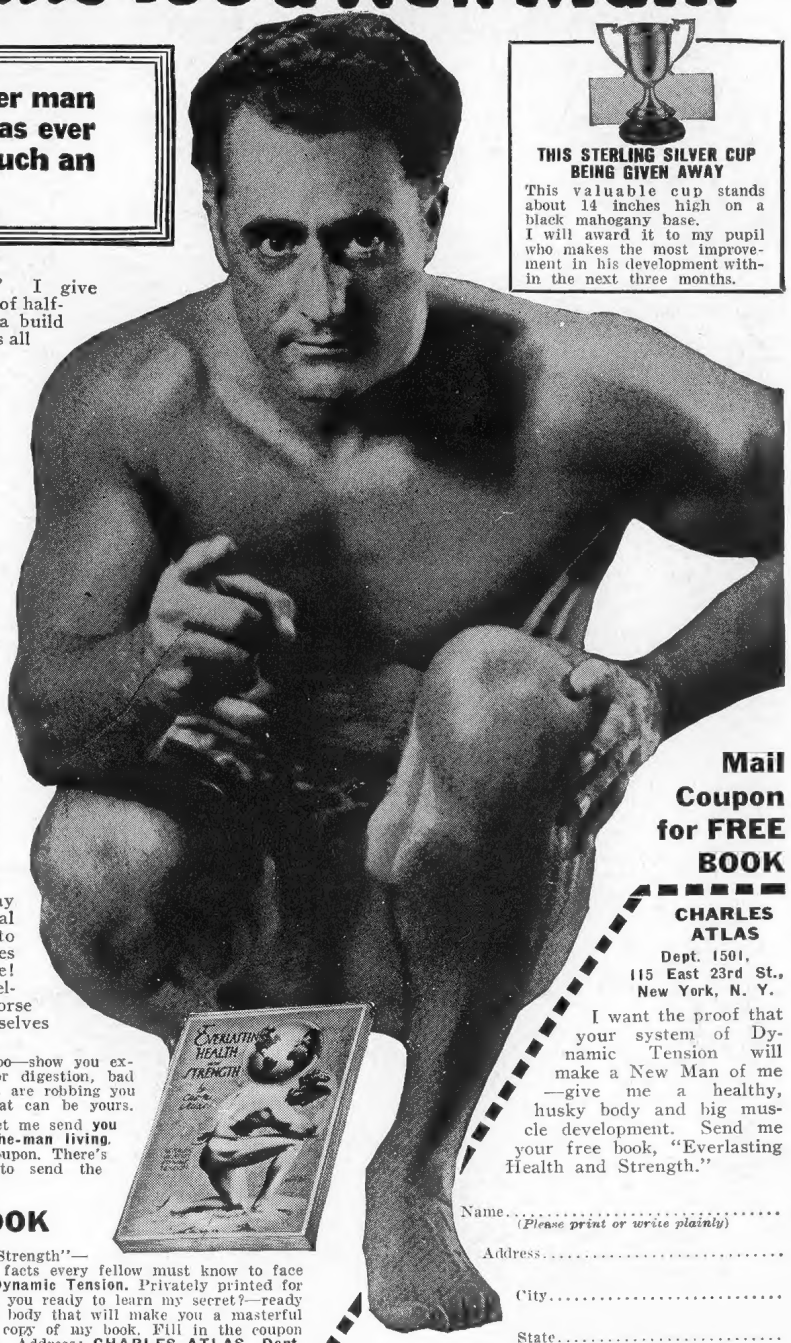

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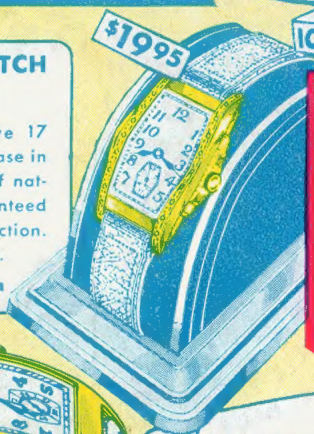

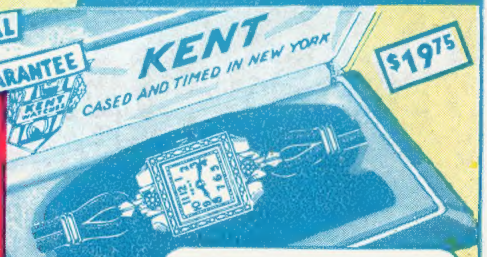

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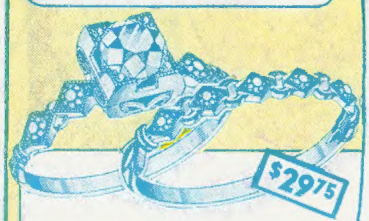

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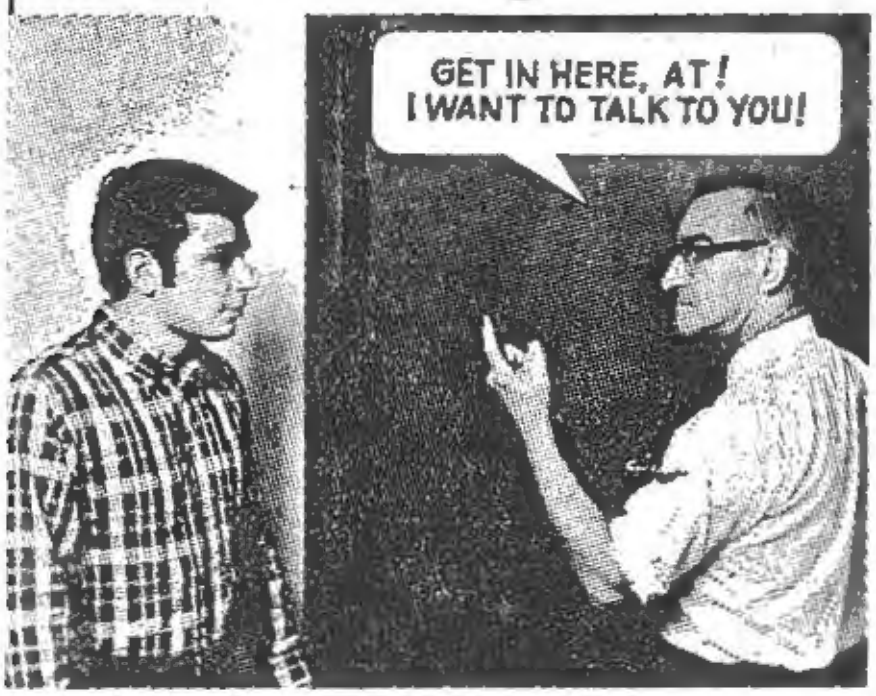

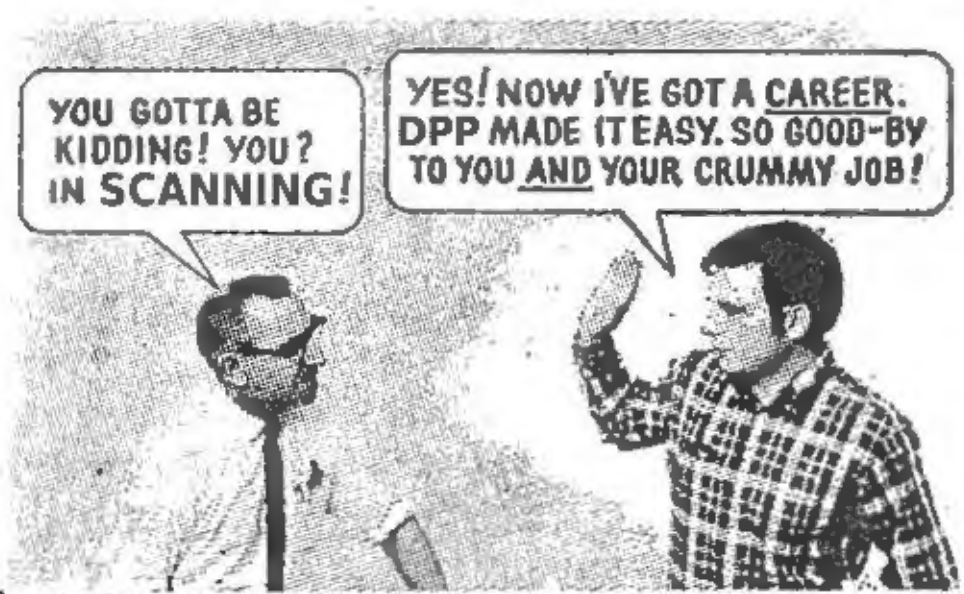

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